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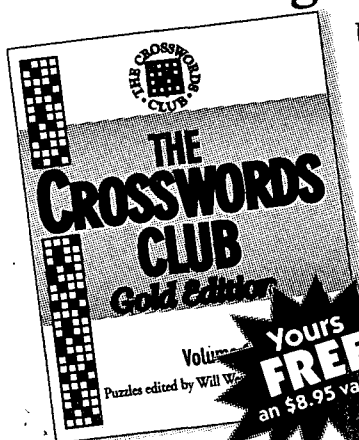
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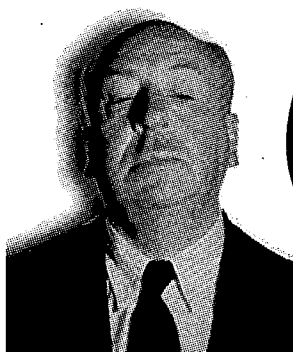
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

NOW THE NOVELLA

Our annual July/August double issue allows us to bring you not only more stories but also a selection of those longer stories known as novellas—perfect for the lazy days of summer (does anyone still have those?). Longer than a short story, shorter than a novel, the novella offers its own peculiar rewards and challenges, and it was a favorite form of the great Rex Stout. Last year, AHMM teamed up with the Wolfe Pack, the official Rex Stout/Nero Wolfe fan club, to honor this challenging form with the Black Orchid Novella Award. The first BONA winner appears in this issue: Congratulations to John Gregory Betancourt for taking home the prize with “Horse Pit.”

Mr. Betancourt's sleuth, the brilliant but wasted alcoholic Peter “Pit” Gellar, is no stranger to our readers; he first appeared in these pages in “Pit and the Pendulum” in the July/August 2005 issue. Mr. Betancourt is himself a publisher; his Wildside Press publishes mostly fantasy and science fiction, but also mystery and crime novels and the short fiction magazines *Weird Tales* and *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*, among others.

When AHMM and the Wolfe Pack launched the Black Orchid Novella Award, our goals were twofold: to celebrate the classic detectives working in the mode of Nero Wolfe, who solved crimes with their wits rather than fists or forensics; and to promote the novella form, of which Stout had been so fond. We were impressed with the variety of novellas that we received and we were heartened to see that the classic detective still inspires writers. Mr. Betancourt's entry stood out for its well-developed plot and for a protagonist that embodies the classic detective ideal while still very much a man of the twenty-first century.

We look forward to the entries in this year's contest.

In the meantime, we welcome two authors to AHMM in this issue. The prolific Amy Myers (“Tom Wasp and the Tower of London”) is the author of four different mystery series. Her Victorian chimney sweep also appears in *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* (Five Star). Before she began her writing career, Ms. Myers was the director of a London publishing firm.

Texan Ben Rehder (“Mind Game”) was a finalist for the 2003 Edgar Award for Best First Novel for *Buck Fever*, the first of a series featuring a Texas game warden. He recently published a sixth novel in the series, *Holy Moly* (St. Martin's Minotaur).

SMART PIGS AND SOUR GAS

ELAINE MENGE

I remember that Friday in July in great detail, the day I became a murderer. When you've been a law-abiding, good-guy-next-door type all your life, the author of articles on thermodynamics and of only one murder in particular, then the details of the day you kill someone tend to remain vivid. Especially if, like me, you're a mechanical engineer. You could say we're a congenitally detail-oriented breed.

More than anything else, I remember my sweat. I've never sweated so much in my life. Don't ever let anyone tell you high humidity isn't a contributing cause of murder.

I was standing in a cow pasture southwest of Mobile, Alabama, not far from Bayou LaBatre—a swampy swath of land lapped at by the weary waves of Mobile Bay. The ground my steel-toed shoes squished into was like no pasture any farmer in the American heartland would recognize. In some picturesque spots along the Gulf Coast, cows wade in this muck, chew just enough grass to keep alive, enjoy just enough sunny days that dry out their stomping grounds to keep them from developing hoof rot. I'm no vet and don't have a clue as to how those cows, and the few bulls that swagger around that rummy range, survive the malarial conditions. Ninety-eight degree heat, hundred and twenty percent humidity, no shade, and enough mosquitoes to brew a stew so thick you could feed millions.

On the day in question, I kept asking myself, what in the hell am I doing here? Ph.D. in engineering, distinguished teaching career behind me, why was I now standing in a mushy cow pasture, my pale skin sealed with a foul-smelling, carcinogenic bug repellent? Two years earlier I could boast of being chairman of the engineering school of a major New England university.

How to describe a south Alabama day in July? Someone else might think it a mild day hardly worth any weatherman clucking

over. For a tenderfoot like me, it was a brain-baker. Not to make excuses.

I'd spent the previous day—six hours of it—in that same boiling hell, and had managed to do so without killing a single soul. That first day, though, my supervisor was safely back in Houston, cooling his large, tough body behind his imposing desk, inside his gigantic office, within our colossal building that boldly scrapes the Lone Star sky. That first day, he wasn't breathing down my neck, and his barking voice was somewhat muted by distance.

My supervisor is Faxon Hall. Can't help thinking that's a made-up name.

The gas fields around Mobile emit sour gas. Hydrogen sulfide. The stuff is poison.

Plain old natural gas kills if you turn on the gas in your oven and stick your head in. The oxygen in the room is muscled out, and you need oxygen to live.

Sour gas is poisonous to begin with. Let's say you're walking through a sour gas field and there's a pipeline leak nearby. If you aren't wearing a protective mask, depending on the concentration, you can die within minutes.

It's quick. The stuff attacks the central nervous system. Your diaphragm forgets to breathe. Simple.

On account of sour gas, I had to shave my beard. Anyone who works around a sour gas field has to be ready to pull a mask on in a flash, and it's got to seal perfectly against your face. Beards fuzz up the works.

My wife didn't like it when I shaved my neatly clipped beard. The day I buzzed it off, I erased the mustache too. I was sure this shearing would please Greta. She complained about the beard. But she wasn't pleased. I don't have a weak chin, either. She just didn't like the change, seeing more of my wonderfully handsome face. Or maybe she disliked seeing me comply with an order. She does have certain authority issues.

There's no pleasing Greta. She's the one who got me actively seeking a job outside of academe at the late age of forty-five in the first place. "Real engineers," she volunteered, "make huge salaries." Why was I ready to accept such paltry remuneration for running an entire university department? Just out of college, even my dumbest students were making more money in a year than I did in five. I should put my name out there, sign up with one of those big petroleum companies.

I didn't want to make the leap, felt nervous about putting my name and brain up for auction in what Greta called the real

world. But I was hired right off. Surprising myself most of all, I thrived. I loved working for this oil company, which shall remain nameless. (So many are down on Big Oil lately. That's a debate for another day.)

Anyway, as soon as I let my enthusiasm leak out, Greta walked.

She's an artist, incestuously linked to academia herself. Greta loved the boost in salary, but hated our move to Houston. She also bewailed my loss of position in the academic world. There's a mega-contradiction at her core, I'm afraid. Her likes and dislikes are often one and the same. That I jumped when she whistled for as long as I did says something about me, but whatever condition that hints of, I believe I've outgrown it. Her stiletto heels and the self-assured way she marches into a room, the ultra-confident aura she exudes, no longer attract me.

In the long run, I have liked my loss of Greta. She let me keep the dog. I liked my new job too. Loved it . . . until Faxon arrived.

Brad, my first supervisor, was a great guy. I fondly recall the curious arch of his eyebrows, his crooked grin, front teeth overlapping. Brad would show interest in my ideas. If I came up with a good one—unlike Faxon—he didn't try to claim ownership himself. He assigned me a challenging job, designing the facilities for a rig twenty miles off Louisiana's coast.

Just as that project was winding down, Brad transferred to Nigeria, eager for the experience and the higher pay those willing to take overseas assignments earn, I suppose.

Who had to fill the void but Faxon Hall, the most ego-driven blowhard I've met this side of the Ivy League's ivy-strangled walls. A tall guy. Not fat, but big. A big man. He filled up a room when he strode in, drove out all the oxygen.

Faxon took an instant dislike to me. Can't say why. I'm easy-going, not at all one of those obsessive-compulsive anal-retentive types the engineering field is famous for. Maybe I reminded him of someone he hated, possibly one of the little people he'd leapfrogged over on his way up the managerial ladder after first stabbing him in the back. Instead of feeling guilt for being a rat, guys like him transform what should be guilt into disgust for their victims.

Faxon Hall is the kind of guy who will step in front of you in line, and if you make the slightest protest, he ignores you. I've never understood people like him, and feel blessed that I haven't run into many such specimens.

Faxon was from Ohio, but wore belts with big gold buckles and stomped around in pricey peacock-skin boots as if he were a true-blue Texan. From the start, he made fun of my Rockport comfort

shoes that are designed to look like dress shoes. They're glorified sneakers, I admit.

Faxon also made fun of my name. I'm a Thomas. Unlike most Thomases in the world, I've never gone by Tom or Tommy. My parents named me Thomas and that's what they wanted me called. For four decades I've had few problems making that understood.

Faxon thought it outlandish that I expected to be called Thomas. When he spoke my name, he'd accent the second syllable. "Tom-ass." I'd respond by cutting his name to Fax. He'd wrinkle his nose. Clearly, he didn't like *his* name being clipped, made to sound like a procedure he ordered his secretary to perform daily.

Dear old Fax.

On his first day in our group, he called me into his office. Thumbing through my file, he said, "I see you have a Ph.D. in engineering." At that, he raised his face to the ceiling and hooted. A raucous, fake-Texan hoot that said, What are you doing here, you hothouse plant? You got no hands-on experience. You're worthless to me, and probably an elitist sissy to boot.

I smiled and nodded at the hoot. My serenity irritated him. He was clearly disappointed that I showed no offense. Whenever he wasn't calling me Tom-ass, he took to calling me Doc. "What's up, Doc?" he'd say. I'd sail a breezy New England, self-satisfied smile back, never letting on how I despised him and his peacock boots.

Come to think of it, Faxon and Greta would have made the perfect couple—a real power couple. I can't help feeling the same about Faxon's wife and me, though you can leave the power part off. How did that creep ever persuade a woman like Kaye to marry him? I suspect the only thing Kaye's been guilty of in her life is one fatal mistake: saying yes to Faxon Hall.

I met her soon after Faxon came on board, since he forced our entire group to attend a getting-to-know-you barbeque at his house, a medium-sized mansion in one of Houston's vulgar northern suburbs. Faxon presided over the grill in lordly fashion, while the real work of this culinary ordeal was borne by Kaye. Something about her reminded me of a vanilla birthday cake I was presented with on the first birthday I can remember. Fresh and sweet and yummy. Blond, she wore a sundress dotted with floral bouquets. The material was old-fashioned, but she made it look bouncy and new.

Kaye greeted one couple after another, full of gracious party smiles. Watching when she thought no one was looking, I saw the words "long-suffering" and "regret" written all over her beautiful face.

We talked no more than fifteen minutes, but it took only one minute for me to like her. Afterwards, I worried I'd said too much. I told her about the offshore facility I was so proud of designing, but let slip that now that the guard had changed, Faxon had put me in charge of—and I supplied a telling pause here—corrosion. I rolled my eyes, showing how little I relished the job. What a comedown. Me—the king of rust. I was heartened when she rolled her eyes in answer, as if we'd agreed on a crucial point.

She said, "Faxon's good at that kind of thing. But don't tell anyone I said so."

"That kind of thing." Demoting people, she meant. Humiliating them. I'm sure she didn't mean he was good at rust. He didn't know beans about corrosion.

We exchanged another mutual, slit-eyed nod.

Yes, I said to myself. She knows what a snake he is. If I, a complete stranger, have been demoted to seeking out rust, I could easily imagine how far her value might have sunk since their courtship, back when Faxon was all compliments, candy, and flowers. I also grasped why she was still with him. Two of the cutest kids you ever saw—boy and a girl. Messy divorces are bad for children; any divorce from Faxon would be messy. I said a prayer that neither of these innocents would take after Papa.

It was during that party that I explained to Kaye what a smart pig is. As undisputed head of corrosion, I'd been put to the task of learning everything I never wanted to know about smart pigs.

She giggled at the term. She brought her wineglass to her lips and squinched up her pixie nose, as if champagne bubbles were tickling, though the wine was quite flat.

"Not sure why they're called pigs," I said. "They're fat, cylindrical things, designed to whoosh down the entire length of a pipeline, and they make a squealing noise on the way. A diagnostic tool, sort of like a colonoscopy that tips us off if corrosion's present. There're several types. Smart pigs give the most data. They're packed with sophisticated electronics."

"You mean there are dumb pigs too?" She wrinkled her nose again, clearly delighted with the idea.

"Right. The cheaper ones don't tell as much. Smaller companies use those. We use the smartest of the smart pigs, since we can afford them."

I explained that before zapping one of those fat, expensive pigs through the line, we use smaller test pigs. Made of nothing more than a hard center encased in Styrofoam, they come in graduated sizes. Once a test pig is retrieved, the casing is studied for gouges, anything that might reveal conditions inside the line, like a ballis-

tics expert learning from the gouges on a spent bullet's casing.

A ship's anchor bangs into an offshore pipeline, for instance. The cheap test pig's skin clues us about any dents or punctures before we risk slinging our big mama pig down the line.

Preparing a pipeline for the final run of the ultimate smart pig can take two weeks or more. In the morning, you send your first small test pig off and wait until it makes it to the retrieval station where it's pulled out and analyzed. In the afternoon, you send a second pig. The following day, more cheap pigs go, their diameters increasing in size. No way do you send the final pig, the one that's loaded with stuff and makes the snuggest fit with the pipeline's inner dimensions, until you're damned sure it won't get hung up. A stuck pig is a headache you don't want to deal with if you can help it.

"I've heard minding the line on a pig day can be boring," I told Kaye. "Very soon, I'll find out how boring."

Come to think of it, maybe I talked to her longer than fifteen minutes, since I also related a tragic story I'd heard, something that happened two years earlier just east of our field in south Alabama. This pasture was leased by another company, not ours, and a sour gas line ran down it, buried about three feet, crossing twenty acres.

Two farmhands happened to see a dead cow in the field. What they didn't know was that the leasing company's gas line had ruptured. Approaching the cow, the farmhands would have inhaled a strong, initial hit of gas. After that, they'd smell nothing. The unfortunate thing about sour gas is, if you get smacked by a concentrated whiff, your smeller is instantly knocked out. You might balk at that first rotten egg scent, but once the smeller goes, you think everything's cool. Not long after, you keel over, as dead as the cow whose pulse you were sent to take.

The story was gruesome. Kaye seemed appropriately aghast; my horror story obviously fascinated her.

Just about then, Greta approached Kaye and me. We were still together, only weeks from our final rift. As she wiped barbecue sauce off her fingers with a plaid napkin, Greta smiled and made small talk with Kaye. Meanwhile, I picked up Greta's secret code, meant for me. The question: How much longer must we endure this lowbrow assortment of computer nerds, dorky engineering wizards, and their vacant wives?

After the barbecue, I sometimes wondered how Kaye fared, living with Faxon. On the day in question, as I stood in that soggy field, sun banging on my hard hat, I recalled the lecture on smart

pigs I'd amused her with. As I'd talked to Kaye, I hadn't been pleased about being appointed head of corrosion, but never did I think that demotion would land me here in this steaming muck.

Technically, I was lead engineer on the pipeline test, yet Faxon ordered me to stand at a monitoring station that had zero value to our mission. To get there I had to take a supply boat to the point where the underwater line meets the shore. After being dropped off, I slogged through sucking mud for two football fields until I reached the spot where the pipeline, about as big around as a nice-sized cow's chest, muscles up from underground, then dives again.

The true receiving station, which by all rights is where I should have been, was another mile inland from where I was ordered to stand.

I argued with Faxon over the phone when he issued that order. I said, "You can get any grunt to stand at that station."

"Sure, Doc. But this will show the other men you're not above the lowest work." His voice was oily with fake humanitarian aspiration. "And after all, you *are* a relatively new hire, Tom-ass."

I kept my mouth shut. I liked my fat paychecks.

We had little trouble the first day. The test pig squealed through without incident. Hours later, the second pig also passed. Still, I'd stood out in that field a long time.

I'm no outdoorsman. I'm very happy in my air-conditioned office, door closed, working problems on my computer. This was nuts, risking heat stroke while waiting for a pig to hum by. Faxon said I was to keep my ear to the metal, listen for the pig singing in the pipe, and report that event over my walkie-talkie.

A high school kid could do this, I kept telling myself. My anger rose with the mercury and intensified as the marsh's fetid smells bloomed in the heat. I concluded that Faxon's only motive for putting me in this spot was a sick wish to demean me.

The second pig, I learned that evening, had not emerged unblemished. It showed deep gashes along one side.

We had a problem. Probably some considerable dent in the off-shore section of the line was the cause. The pig-sliding exercise would be repeated tomorrow. Like a general commanding strategic forces, Faxon phoned me that night.

I couldn't believe his orders. In the morning I was to take up the same position in the swampy pasture, stand with my walkie-talkie at the ready, and report any pig action whatsoever. Only, on this second day, Faxon promised that he, the engineer-in-chief, would put in an appearance to cheer on the troops. Something was amiss with the pipeline. Whatever it was, it had him worried. "Corrosion, Doc," he said to me. "Corrosion is important."

It was that evening that I heard about the cow. One of our helicopter pilots, flying relief drillers to our offshore rigs, told me that he'd noticed a cow lying motionless in the field below on the return trip, about a half mile inland. That might not be far from my position at the monitoring station, I thought.

The pilot was beat and hadn't mentioned the cow sighting to anyone else, I was certain. I watched after him as he headed toward his quarters. "Got tomorrow morning off," he called back to me. "Once my head hits that pillow—" He smacked his hands together. "—I'm gonna sleep like the dead."

Next morning, after being let off at the same soggy spot by the supply boat and slogging inland to the intermediate station, I kept on going. A gas mask, required, dangled from my belt. After covering several hundred yards north of my station, I planted the mask on my smooth face. Sure enough, another five minutes ahead I found the cow just to the right of our buried gas line. She was hunkered down, legs crumpled beneath her, glassy eyed, as if contemplating the beauties of nature. I glanced at the indicator on my belt. When gas is present, the white tape turns black. The strip I pulled out was black as tar. This cow, a beautiful creature, sure hadn't died of old age.

I headed back to my post. Though still early morning, the heat was mounting. Once I got away from that bad scene, I was happy to pull the mask off and feel the air against my face once again. I leaned against the huge pipe, one hand on the walkie-talkie, ready to call in my discovery. Whatever problems the guys were having launching the pig from offshore, there were other problems upstream—this leak—and I needed to report it.

My thumb was on the call button, at the ready, but I hesitated. I can't say why. Maybe I was thinking about the poor cow.

She was a tawny brown with milk-white patches. Being a city boy, I'd never been that close to a cow before, even if she was a dead cow. I felt sorry for her, and mused for a little while about how sudden and unexpected death can be.

At the same time, I was scared. In fact, I was amazed at myself for marching up the line as I had done. A bull could appear any time. The previous day this thought had nagged periodically to the point that my breaths came fast, and I'd have to chug-a-lug water from the giant Thermos I'd hauled out there. What if a bull pranced up and decided I was a sweet target? There were no climbing trees around. My bit of pipeline wasn't high enough to keep me out of harm's way.

Snakes. In my steel-toed boots, I felt protected. But what if one sprang up and fanged me higher on the leg? How long would it

take to stretcher me out of this forsaken pasture? How long to a hospital and antivenom treatment?

And then there were gators. I'd seen them on the boat ride in, their blinkless eyes skimming the water's surface. Twelve-foot mama gators trolled near my spot, easy. I heard they prowled inland looking for mammals of all sizes. They'd surprise a deer, pull it deep underwater, and wedge it beneath sunken branches. Storing it in the water was smart. The deer would decompose less quickly and the gator could return for multiple feedings.

Gators are quick. Nature programs rarely show you how fast alligators can run, their knife-lined maws open and hissing.

I was having these thoughts about alligators, snakes, and bulls, when like a mirage—speaking of bull—Faxon appeared. Coming from our drop-off point, he strode through the weedy grass, a glitzy, Precambrian smile on his face.

"What's up, Doc?"

From his cheery tone, you'd think he were greeting me poolside in the Bahamas, coconut drink in hand.

"It goes well," I answered. "I love watching mosquitoes mate. What you doing, Fax, slumming with the peons?"

He let loose a Faxon-type laugh. Even under the sprawling sky he filled up the entire picture frame with his bass ho, ho, ho, like the freaking Jolly Green Giant.

"We've got a major glitch." He turned serious. "So here I am. Somebody needs to sort out this shit, and that somebody is me."

Clearly, he had no confidence in his Corrosion Czar. How I might sort out any "shit" while stuck in this field, he didn't bother to address.

"Might be a problem upline too," I said.

His back to the exposed pipeline segment, Faxon pushed down against it with his hands, and parked his butt up there, legs dangling, as if he were about to open a picnic basket and split a baloney sandwich with me. "Yeah? Like what would you know about anything upline?"

"Possible dead cow."

His brow creased. "I didn't hear anything about a cow."

"Forget it," I said. "Probably not a factor."

That soon I could feel every trick I knew about reverse psychology kicking in. "Helicopter pilot mentioned it, late." I yawned. "Probably nothing."

"Yeah, Doc? Tell me what you know. You need to be on top of stuff like this, Tom-ass. You're way too nonchalant."

At that word "nonchalant," I decided to let him have it. Greta used that one on me. What a dumb word.

I pawed the ground with one foot, mimicking Faxon's bullish style. "About a half mile upline." I couldn't have sounded any more unconcerned. "The pilot said he thought he saw a cow. He was vague. I wouldn't bother checking it out."

"No. You wouldn't."

I gave him a meek stare.

Faxon pushed off the gleaming pipe and started marching north.

"Hey. Where's your mask?" I called.

He shrugged me off. Knew he would.

I strode after him. "Company rules," I said, my tone almost pleading. "No one works a sour gas field without a mask."

I knew that although big on rules, Faxon felt none applied to him. Too macho for a mask, just as he'd never deign to use an umbrella in a thunderstorm. If his hard hat didn't shout FAXON HALL, printed in fancy letters, he probably wouldn't have worn that either.

He flung a hand out, pointing ahead, and assumed a rugged stance, the other hand propped on his hip. "A cow's down, and you don't report it? You moron. I'll have your ass for this."

I can be a marvel of self-control. People like me drive people like Faxon nuts. "I don't think you should go." My voice was calm, as if I were unaware of any insult. "I'll call in a copter to fly over. Why tromp all the way up there? There's snakes and—"

"And lions and tigers and bears." He started marching up the line again, turning to sling me a sneer. "You weenie."

"If it's true, about the cow," I hollered, "you need a mask. Take mine." I held it up. "Better safe than sorry."

He turned to face me and gave me a look that implied my IQ must be fifty digits off his own. "I know sour gas when I smell it," he said.

The man was so full of what they used to call the Right Stuff. If I'd said no need for a mask, he would have demanded mine. But suggesting he needed one? No way would he accept that. Taking my mask would mark him as a weak sister.

I waited, sweat prickling my face. From my earlier hike, I knew how long it'd take him to get there and back. Once thirty minutes passed, I was reasonably sure that sour gas, my weapon of choice, had done its work. He should have returned after twenty, unless he'd decided to give the cow CPR, or last rites.

Once another fifteen minutes passed, I called it in that Fax had hiked upline and hadn't returned. I wasn't keen to check the results myself. Seems I'm not the kind of killer who needs to view his handiwork or return to the scene of the crime. For that matter, the scene of the crime was where I was already standing.



The funeral was great. During the visitation, they had some wonderful party food, even shrimp on toothpicks, in a second room adjoining the one where Faxon was lying in state. I'd never seen food at a funeral before.

Kaye asked me to be a pallbearer. They hadn't been in Houston long; seems that few of Faxon's relatives or friends were able to attend.

"It'd be an honor," I said.

When they lowered the coffin, I thought that there should have been two. One for Faxon's body and a second one for his bloated ego.

I was surprised the funeral was held in Houston, but Kaye decided to buy a plot here instead of going all the way back to Ohio. "So much fuss," she said. Faxon's parents, I gathered, were already dead.

The kids seemed dazed, or high on sugar cookies. Fortunately, they were young, five and seven. From what I knew of Faxon's work habits, they didn't see much of him, so I can't say I felt too bad on that score. Also, they'd get huge death benefits since their dad died in a work-related accident.

The funeral was the first time I'd seen Kaye since the barbeque. I sensed a positive change in her. She seemed more relaxed. If there was any tension in her demeanor, I suspect it was from having to suppress a certain natural gaiety.

"Thank you so much," she said, hugging me, "for all you did for Faxon."

I shuffled my feet and bowed my head as if receiving a crown of laurel.

"I heard you begged him not to go on. You offered your own gas mask. That was so kind."

"Freak accident."

"Not so freak, really." Her eyes were startlingly intense, holding mine.

"I offered the mask. Don't know why he wouldn't take it." I believe my voice sounded whiney.

"Oh, but you knew Faxon, didn't you? He wanted everything to be his idea, I'm afraid. You knew that about him, Thomas. We both knew."

She said the words with no intonation of blame. My heart froze at her next statement: "You'll never know how grateful I am, that you took care of Faxon."

And at that, she turned her warm smile on another well-wisher. 🐷

THE OPPOSITE OF O

MARTIN LIMÓN

“**N**ever the twain shall meet,” a wise man once said.

He was referring to the Occident and the Orient, but as a criminal investigator for the 8th United States Army in Seoul, Republic of Korea, I can assure you that the two worlds often meet. Usually in harmony. Occasionally in conflict. And in the case of Private First Class Everett P. Rothenberg and Miss O Sung-hee, the two worlds collided at the intersection of warm flesh and the cold, sharpened tip of an Army-issue bayonet.

My name is George Sueño. Me and my partner, Ernie Bascom, were dispatched from 8th Army Headquarters as soon as we received word about a stabbing near Camp Colbern, a communications compound located in the countryside some eighteen miles east of the teeming metropolis of Seoul.

Paldang-ni was the name of the village. It clings to the side of the gently sloping foothills of the Kumdang Mountains just below the brick and barbed-wire enclosure that surrounds Camp Colbern. The roads were narrow and farmers pushed wooden carts piled high with winter turnips, and old women in short blouses and long skirts balanced huge bundles of laundry atop their heads. Ernie drove slowly through the busy lanes so as to avoid splashing mud on the industrious pedestrians that milled about us. Not because Ernie Bascom was a polite kind of guy but because he wasn't quite sure where in this convoluted maze of alleys we would find the road that led to the Paldang Station of the Korean National Police.

Above a whitewashed building, the flag of Daehan Minguk, the Republic of Korea, fluttered in the cold morning breeze. The yin and the yang symbols clung to one another, like red and blue teardrops embracing on a field of pure white. Ernie parked the jeep out front and together we strode into the station. Five minutes later we were interrogating a prisoner: a thin and very nervous young man by the name of Private First Class Everett P. Rothenberg.





Geographically, Korea doesn't sit on the exact opposite side of the Earth from the United States, but it's pretty close. Things are different here. People look at their lives and their relationships and their place in the cosmos through a different lens than people in the States do. For example, G.I.'s new in country see Koreans waving good-bye to one another but are puzzled when no one departs. Actually, waving the hand with the palm facing downward means "come here." So what looks like "good-bye" to an American actually means "hello."

Similarly, a Korean never says "no" to another person's face. Such a bald statement of negativity damages *kibun*, the aura of congeniality that envelopes human relationships. Instead, a polite Korean will answer "yes," meaning "yes, I'll think about it." So "yes," G.I.'s soon come to find out, usually means "no."

Children also have a different attitude toward their parents. You'll never hear a Korean child saying, "I didn't ask to be born." No matter how disaffected a Korean child is with his or her parents, they always give their parents credit for at least providing them with the opportunity to be born. An opportunity they see as being quite preferable to not being born.

We all know that in Asia elders are honored rather than ignored and that the past is revered as opposed to the future. But another difference that G.I.'s run into is two women calling one another "sisters." At first we believe that two women who work together and call one another "sister" are actually sisters. Sometimes we're puzzled that the two women don't look alike—one is tall and the other is short or one has a narrow face and the other has a round face—but having heard vaguely about the workings of genetics, we write that off as the occasional anomaly that happens within families. It is only later, after a G.I. becomes seasoned in the ways of Frozen Chosun, that he realizes that when two young women call one another "sister" they are actually referring to the fact that they are close—and often inseparable—friends. Conversely, when a G.I. stumbles across two young women who actually are biological sisters, they will most often refuse to admit to any relationship. Why? Because the family is considered sacred in Korean society, and a dumb foreigner, especially a know-nothing American G.I., has no business prying into the complex interrelationships of a Korean clan.

As if all this isn't confusing enough, there is also the language barrier. And then, of course, the biggest barrier of all: American arrogance. Our refusal to believe that foreigners have anything whatsoever to teach us.



"They were sisters," Private Rothenberg told us.

"Who?" Ernie asked.

"Miss O. And the woman she shared a hooch with, Miss Kang."

"Sisters?"

"Yeah."

Ernie crossed his arms and stared skeptically at Rothenberg. Rothenberg, for his part, allowed long forearms to hang listlessly over bony legs. The three-legged stool he sat upon was too low for him and his spine curved forward and his head bobbed. He looked like a man who'd abandoned any hope of receiving a fair shake.

"Didn't it ever trouble you," Ernie asked, "that the two women had different last names?"

Rothenberg shrugged bony shoulders. "I figured they had different fathers or something."

I asked the main question. "Why'd you kill her, Rothenberg?"

He tilted his head toward me and his moist blue eyes became larger and rounder.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"What's to believe? You haven't told us anything one way or the other."

"I told them." He pointed to the three khaki-clad Korean National Policemen standing outside the cement-walled interrogation room. Their arms were crossed, fists clenched, narrow eyes alight with malice. Rays from a single electric bulb illuminated the interrogation room, revealing cobwebs and dried rat feces in unswept corners.

"What'd you tell the KNPs?" I asked.

"I told them I couldn't have killed Miss O."

"Why not?"

Rothenberg once again allowed his head to hang loosely on his long neck. "Because I love her," he said.

Love. The classic four-letter word. Ernie smirked. Virtually every young G.I. who arrives in Korea and finds his first *yobo* down in the ville falls in love. The U.S. Army is so used to this phenomenon that they require eight months' worth of paperwork for an American G.I. to marry a Korean woman. What with a twelve-month tour of duty, a G.I. has to fall in love early and hard to be allowed permission to marry. Why all the hassles? Simple. To protect innocent young American G.I.'s from the sinister wiles of Asian dragon ladies. At least, that's the official rationale. The real reason is flat-out racism.

"Where were you last night, Rothenberg?"

"You mean after curfew?"

"Yes. But let's start from the beginning. What time did you leave work?"

I dragged another wooden stool from against the wall of the interrogation room and sat down opposite Private First Class Everett P. Rothenberg. I pulled out my pocket notebook and my ballpoint pen and prepared to write. Rothenberg started talking.

Ernie leaned against the cement wall, arms crossed, and continued to smirk. The KNPs continued to glare. A spider found its web and slowly crawled toward a quivering moth.

Our first stop was the Dragon Lady Teahouse.

Miss O had worked here. And according to Rothenberg, she was the toast of the town. The tallest and most shapely and best looking business girl in the village of Paldang-ni. The front door was covered with a brightly painted façade; a replica of a gateway to an ancient imperial palace. The heavy wooden door was locked. Ernie and I strolled around back. Here the setting was more real. Piled cases of empty *soju* bottles, plastic-wrapped garbage rotting in rusty metal cans, a long-tailed rat scurrying down a vented drainage ditch.

The back door was open. Ernie and I walked in. The odor of ammonia and soapy water assaulted our nostrils. After a short hallway, light from a red bulb guided us into the main serving room. Wooden tables with straight-backed chairs covered most of the floor. Cushioned booths lined the walls, and behind a serving counter a youngish-looking Korean woman sat beneath a green-shaded lamp, laboring over heavy accounting ledgers. When she saw us, she pulled off her horn-rimmed glasses and stared, mouth agape.

I flashed my ID. Ernie found a switch and overhead fluorescent bulbs buzzed to life. The woman stared at my Criminal Investigation badge and finally said, "*Weikurei nonun?*"

No bow. No polite verb endings. Just asking me what I wanted. A Korean cop would've popped her in the jaw. Being a tolerant Westerner, I shrugged off the insult.

"What we're doing here," I said, "is we want to talk to Miss Kang Mi-ryul."

She touched the tip of her forefinger to her nose. Another hand gesture not used in the West. She was saying, that's me. I explained why we were here but she'd already guessed. She said, "Miss O" and pulled out a handkerchief. After a few tears, she calmed down and started to talk. In Korean. Telling me all about her glorious and gorgeous friend, the late O Sung-hee. About Miss O's amorous conquests, about the job offers from other teahouse

and bar owners in town, about the men—both Korean and American—who constantly pursued her.

Miss Kang closed the accounting books and, after shrugging on a thick cotton coat, walked with us a few blocks through the village. It was almost noon now and a few chop houses were open. The aroma of fermented cabbage and garlic drifted through the air. Miss Kang led us to her hooch, the same hooch she and Miss O had shared. She allowed us to peruse Miss O's meager personal effects. Cosmetics, hair products, a short row of dresses in a plastic armoire, tattered magazines with the faces of international film stars grinning out at us. Then Kang told us that Miss O's hometown was Kwangju, far to the south, and that she'd come north to escape the poverty and straightlaced traditionalism of the family she'd been born into. When I asked her who had killed Miss O, she blanched and pretended to faint. But it was a pretty good act because she plopped loudly to the ground and a neighbor called the Korean National Police, a contingent of which had been following us anyway.

In less than a minute they arrived and glared at us as if Miss Kang's passing out had been our fault. One of the younger cops stood a little too close to Ernie and Ernie shoved him. That caused a wrestling match and a lot of cursing until the senior KNP and I broke it up.

So much for good relationships between international law enforcement agencies.

As we left, Miss Kang was still crying and two of the KNPs, God bless them, were still following us.

Camp Colbern wasn't much better.

Rothenberg worked in the 304th Signal Battalion Communications Center. Electronic messages came in over secure lines and were printed, copied, and distributed to the appropriate bureaucratic cubbyholes. Apparently, Camp Colbern had two functions. First, as a base camp for an army aviation unit, boasting a landing pad with a dozen helicopters and associated support personnel, and second, as a relay station for the grid of U.S. Army signal sites that runs up and down the spine of South Korea. When I asked the signal officers a few technical questions, they clammed up. I didn't have a "need to know," they told me.

"How do they know what we 'need to know'?" Ernie asked me. "This is a criminal investigation. We don't know what we need to know until after we already know it."

I shrugged.

Private Rothenberg had been a steady and reliable worker, I was

told. A good soldier. He had no close buddies because his off-duty time was spent out in the village of Paldang-ni, apparently mooning over Miss O Sung-hee.

Ernie pulled a photograph from his pocket, one he'd palmed while we rummaged through O's personal effects at Miss Kang's hooch. It was of Miss O and Miss Kang standing arm in arm, smiling at the camera, in front of a boat rental quay on the bank of a river. The sign in Korean said NAMHAN-KANG, the Namhan River not far from here. Miss O was a knockout, with a big beautiful smile and even white teeth and a figure that would make any sailor—or any G.I.—jump ship. Miss Kang, by comparison, was a plain-looking slip of a girl. Shorter, thinner, less attractive. And her smile didn't dazzle as Miss O's did; it looked unsure of itself, slightly afraid, wary of the world.

Atop her head, at a rakish angle, Miss O wore a black baseball cap. Using a magnifying glass, I examined the embroidery on the front. It was a unit designation: 545th Army Aviation Battalion, Company C. In smaller print on the side was a shorter row of letters. It took stronger light for me to make them out. Finally I did: Boson. I handed the photograph back to Ernie.

Ernie took another long look at the gorgeous Miss O and then slipped the photo back into his pocket. Something told me he had no intention of letting it go.

The air traffic controllers at the Camp Colbern aviation tower told us that Chief Warrant Officer Mike Boson was due in at sixteen thirty. Four thirty P.M. civilian time. Ernie and I were standing on the edge of the Camp Colbern helipad when the Huey UH-1N helicopter landed. As the blades gradually slowed their rotation, a crewman hopped out, and then the engine whined and the blades slowed further, and finally the co-pilot and then the pilot jumped out of the chopper. Chief Warrant Officer Mike Boson slipped off his helmet as he walked toward us and tucked it beneath his arm.

"The tower told me you wanted to talk to me," he said.

Ernie and I flashed our identification. I asked if there was a more comfortable place to talk.

"No," Boson said. "We talk here. What do you want?"

The chopper's engine still buzzed. The crewman and the co-pilot hustled about on various errands, all the while listening to what we were saying. Boson, apparently, wanted it that way. We asked Boson where he had been last night, the night of the murder.

"In the O Club." The officers' club here on Camp Colbern. "For

dinner, a couple of beers, and then to the BOQ for a good night's rest." The bachelor officers' quarters.

"You didn't visit Miss O Sung-hee?" Ernie asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

Boson shrugged. "I don't run the ville when I have duty the next morning."

"You were scheduled to fly?"

"Yes. To Taegu to pick up the 19th Support Group commander. And then south from there."

"When did you hear Miss O was dead?"

"Just before I left out this morning. Everyone was talking about it."

"Did you realize you'd be questioned?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I knew her, but a lot of other guys knew her too."

"Like who?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know their names."

We continued to question Warrant Officer Boson and he finally admitted that he'd spent more than just a few nights with Miss O Sung-hee and that he'd also escorted her and Miss Kang to the Namkang River the day the photograph Ernie showed him had been taken. They'd rented a boat and rowed to a resort island in the middle of the river and a few hours later returned to Paldang-ni, where Boson spent the night with Miss O.

"In her hooch?" I asked.

Warily, Boson nodded.

"It's tiny," Ernie said. "So where did Miss Kang sleep?"

For the third time, Boson shrugged. "I don't know."

"But she lived there, too, didn't she?"

"Yes. But every time I stayed with Miss O, she'd disappear. I figured she bunked with the landlady who owns the hooch."

"But you weren't sure?"

"Why would I care?"

We asked if he knew Rothenberg. He didn't.

"You don't know a lot of things," Ernie said.

Boson bristled. "I'm here to fly helicopters. Not to write a history of business girls in the ville."

"And not to murder anyone?"

Boson dropped his helmet and leapt for Ernie's throat. I thrust my forearms forward, blocked him and, although it was a struggle, managed to hold Boson back. The chopper crewman and the copilot ran over. I shoved Chief Warrant Officer Boson backward, they held him, and I dragged Ernie off of the helipad.



Night fell purple and gloomy over the village of Paldang-ni. But then a small miracle happened. Neon blinked to life: red, yellow, purple, gold. Some of it pulsating, some of it rotating, all of it beckoning to any young G.I. with a few dollars in his pocket to enter the Jade Lady Nightclub or the Frozen Chosun Bar or the Dragon Lady Teahouse. Tailor shops and brassware emporiums and drugstores and sporting goods outlets lined the narrow lanes. Rock music pulsated out of beaded curtains. A late autumn Manchurian wind blew cold and moist through the alleyways, but scantily clad Korean business girls stood in miniskirts and hot pants and low-cut cotton blouses, their creamy bronze flesh pimpled like plucked geese.

The women cooed as we passed, but Ernie and I ignored them and entered the first bar on the right: The Frozen Chosun. They served draft OB, Oriental Brewery beer, on tap. We jolted back a short mug and a shot of black market brandy, ignored the entreaties of the listless hostesses scattered around the dark enclosure, and continued on to the next dive. At each stop, I inquired about Miss O Sung-hee. Everyone knew her. They all knew that she'd been murdered brutally and they all assumed that the killer had been her jealous erstwhile boyfriend, an American G.I. by the name of Everett P. Rothenberg. But a few of the waitresses and bartenders and business girls I talked to speculated further. Miss O had Korean boyfriends. A few. Mostly men of power. Business owners in the bar district. But one of the men stood out. It was only after laying out cash on an overpriced sweetheart drink that one underweight bar hostess breathed his name. Shin, she said. Or that's what everyone called him: Mr. Shin. He was a dresser and a player and had no visible means of support other than, she'd heard, playing a mean game of pool and beating up the occasional business girl who fell under his spell.

"A *kampe*," I said to her. A gangster.

She shook her head vehemently. "No. Not that big. He small. How you say?" The overly made-up young woman thought for a moment and then came up with the appropriate phrase. "He small potatoes."

In addition to buying her a drink, I slipped her a thousand *won* note. About two bucks. The tattered bill disappeared into the frayed waistband of her skirt.

When Ernie and I entered the King's Pavilion Pool Hall, all eyes gazed at us.

There was no way for two *Miguks* to enter the second-story establishment surreptitiously. It was a large open room filled with cigarette smoke and stuffed with green felt pool tables from one end to the other. Narrow-waisted Korean men held pool cues and leaned over tables and lounged against walls, all of them puffing away furiously on cheap Korean cigarettes and all of them glaring at us, eyes narrow, lips curled into snarls, hatred filling the air even more thickly than the cloud of pungent tobacco smoke. This pool hall wasn't for G.I.'s. It was for Koreans. The G.I.'s had their bars, plenty of them, about two blocks away from here in the foreigners' bar district. Nobody, not even the man who collected money at the entranceway, wanted us here.

Ernie snarled back. "Screw you too," he whispered.

"Steady," I replied.

In Korean, I spoke to the bald-headed man collecting the fees. "Mr. Shin?" I asked. "*Odiso*?" Where is he?

The man looked blankly at me. Then he turned to the men in the pool hall. From somewhere toward the back, a radio hissed and a Korean female singer warbled a rueful note. I said again, louder this time, "Mr. Shin."

The snarls turned to grimaces of disdain. Korean cuss words floated our way. A few men laughed. More of them turned away from us, lifting their cues, returning their attention to eight balls and rebound angles and pockets. Nobody came forward. Nobody would tell us who Mr. Shin was or, more importantly, where to find him.

Ernie and I turned and walked back down the stairway. At the next pool hall, we repeated the same procedure. With the same result.

Later that night, we stood at the spot where Miss O had been murdered.

The site was located atop a hill overlooking both Paldang-ni and Camp Colbern. On the opposite side of the hill, to the north, moonlight shone down on the sinuous flow of the Namhan River. One or two boats drifted in the distance. Fishermen on their way home to straw-thatched huts. On the peak of the hill stood a tile-roofed shrine with a stone foundation and an enormous brass bell hanging from sturdy rafters. No one was there now, but I imagined that periodically Buddhist monks walked up the well-worn path to sound the ancient-looking bell.

"When did they find her?" Ernie asked.

I pulled out a penlight to read my tattered notebook.

"Zero five hundred this morning," I said. "Just before dawn. By

two Buddhist monks who came up here to say their morning prayers. She was lying right here."

I pointed at the far edge of the stone foundation, nearest the river.

"Stabbed in the back once," I continued. "And then four or five times in the chest. She bled to death."

"And the murder weapon?"

"Never found. The KNP's assume it was a bayonet for two reasons. The size and depth of the entry wounds and the fact that Rothenberg, being a G.I., would've had access to one."

"His bayonet was found in his field gear."

"He could've stolen another one. Happens all the time."

"Or," Ernie replied, "the killer could've bought one on the black market."

I nodded. Ernie was right. The KNP's were taking a big leap in locking up Rothenberg. So far, they had no hard evidence linking him to the murder. Still, public opinion had to be mollified. When a young Korean woman is murdered, someone has to be locked up, and fast. Otherwise, the public will wonder why they're spending their hard-earned tax dollars on police salaries. Someone has to pay for the crime. Like the yin and the yang symbols on the national flag, harmony in the universe must be restored. Someone is murdered, someone must pay for that murder. Everett P. Rothenberg wouldn't be the first American G.I. convicted in Korea of something that there was no definitive proof he'd actually done. But if that's the case, harmony will come to his defense. If there's little or no evidence proving that he did it, Rothenberg will receive a light sentence. Maybe four years in a Korean jail and then deportation back to the States. So far, no one—including me and Ernie—had any real idea who'd murdered Miss O Sung-hee.

Rothenberg's alibi was sketchy. After finishing the day shift at the 304th Signal Battalion Commo Center, he'd eaten chow, showered, changed clothes, and headed to the ville. At about eighteen hundred hours, he'd arrived at the Dragon Lady Teahouse. There, he'd sat in a corner sipping on ginseng tea while Miss Kang and Miss O Sung-hee worked. Miss Kang doing most of the actual serving and preparation. Miss O sitting with customers—Korean businessmen, small groups of American officers—adding beauty and charm to their evening. Before the midnight curfew, according to Rothenberg, Miss O convinced him that she was too tired to see him that evening and he should return to Camp Colbern. He did. Since he returned to his base camp before the midnight-to-four curfew, the M.P.'s at the main gate didn't bother to log in his name. Lights were already out in the barracks. In the dark, he'd undressed,

stuffed his clothes and wallet in his wall locker, and hopped into his bunk. None of the other G.I.'s in the barracks had any recollection of his arrival.

Ernie walked over to the bell and rapped it with his knuckles. A low moan reverberated from the sculpted bronze, like the whispered sigh of a giant. We started back down the trail. It was steep. Boulders and thick brambles of bushes blocked our way on either side. We stepped carefully, inching forward, watching our step in the bright moonlight.

"Why'd we bother coming up here?" Ernie asked.

As he spoke, the earth shook. Just slightly. As if something heavy had thudded to the ground. I looked back. I could see nothing except Ernie staring at me quizzically, wondering why I had stopped. Then two more thuds. One after the other. Shallower this time, as if something were skipping forward, becoming louder, rolling toward us.

It emerged from the darkness above Ernie's head, looking for all the world like a steamroller from hell.

"Watch out!" I shouted.

I leapt to the side of the trail and Ernie, not yet fully understanding, followed suit. He dove into a thicket of branches and I landed atop a small boulder and scrambled over it to the opposite side, away from the trail.

The noise grew deafening. One crash after another, and then an enormous metal cylinder flew out of the night, rolling down the trail, careening to the right and then left, barreling down the trail, and smashing everything in its path. It clipped the edge of the thicket and missed Ernie by a couple of feet. I crouched. The huge metal rolling pin crashed against the boulder and the cylinder flew over, only inches above my head. After it passed, Ernie and I sat up, staring at moonlight glistening off the cylinder. The careening monolith continued its pell-mell rush down the side of the hill, smashing an old wooden fence outside a small animal shelter and then hitting the shelter itself. Lumber flew everywhere. The cylinder kept rolling until it slowed and finally landed in a muddy rice paddy with a huge, sloppy *splat*.

"What the hell was that?" Ernie asked.

I rose slowly to my feet, checking uphill to make sure nothing more was coming at us. "The bell," I said.

"The what?"

"The bronze bell. Come on."

We ran back up the pathway. At the top of the hill, the shrine stood empty. Using my penlight, I examined the weathered ropes hanging beneath splintered rafters.

"Sliced," I said.

"With what?" Ernie asked.

"Can't be sure, but with something sharp. Maybe a bayonet."

Mr. Shin found us.

So did about five of his pals. Light from a yellow streetlamp shone on angry faces, all of them belonging to young punks with grease-backed hair and sneers on their lips.

"Why are you looking for me?" Shin asked in Korean.

We stood in an alley not far from the King's Pavilion Pool Hall. Ernie and I had stopped in earlier today.

"Your girlfriend," I told him, "Miss O Sung-hee, was murdered last night. Where were you while she was being killed?"

Shin puffed one time on his cigarette—overly dramatically—and then flicked the flaming butt to the ground. Ernie braced himself, about one long stride away from me, his side to the Korean man nearest him. He was ready to fight. Five to two were the odds, but we'd faced worse.

"Not my girlfriend," Shin said at last, switching to English. "No more. Break up long time ago."

"How long?"

"Maybe one month."

A long time all right. "Miss Kang didn't mention your name to the Korean police. Why not?"

"She no can do."

"'No can do?' Why not?"

"She my . . . how you say? . . . sister."

"She's your sister?"

"Yes. Kang not her real name. Real name same as mine. Shin."

"So you met Miss O through your sister?"

"Yes."

"Why'd you break up with Miss O?"

Shin shrugged. "I tired of her."

I didn't believe that for a minute. Shin was a tough guy all right, and like tough punks all over the world there would be a certain type of woman available to him. Women who thought little of themselves. Women who, in order to build up their self-esteem, flocked toward men who were on the outs with the law. Men who they considered to be exciting. Korea, like everywhere else, had its share of this type of woman. But from everything I'd heard about Miss O Sung-hee, I didn't believe she was that type. She went for cops and attorneys and helicopter pilots. Men of power. Men of real accomplishment. Not men who were broke and hung around pool halls.

"She dumped you," I said.

"Huh?"

"Miss O. She think 'I no like Shin anymore.' She tell you *karra chogi*." Go away.

Shin's sneer twisted in anger.

"No woman tell Shin go away."

Ernie guffawed and said to me, "Is this guy dumb or what?" He stepped past me and glared at Shin. "So you took Miss O to the top of the hill and you used a knife and you killed her."

Shin realized that he was digging a hole for himself.

"No. No way. I no take. That night, I in pool hall. All night. Owner tell you. He see me there."

Shin mentioned the pool hall owner's name because even he knew that nobody would believe the testimony of him and his buddies. I crossed my arms and kept my gaze steady on Shin's eyes. He was a frightened young man. And when he'd heard that Ernie and I were looking for him, he'd voluntarily presented himself. Both these points were in his favor. Could he have murdered Miss O Sung-hee? Sure he could have. But something told me that his alibi would hold up. Otherwise, he wouldn't be standing here anxious to clear his name. If he'd murdered her, he'd be long gone. Still, I'd check with the pool hall owner as soon as I could.

Ernie had his own way of testing Shin's sincerity. He stepped forward until his chest was pushed up almost against Shin's. Ernie glared at Shin for a while and then snarled. "Out of my way."

Shin seemed about to do something, to punch Ernie, but indecision danced in his glistening black eyes. Finally, he sighed and stepped back, making way for Ernie and me. Grumbling, his pals made way too.

We ran the ville.

Shots, beers, business girls on our laps. Ernie was enjoying the rock music and the girls and the frenzied crowds and gave himself over to a night of mindless pleasure. Me, I sipped on my drink, barely heard the music, and ignored the caresses of the gorgeous young women who surrounded me.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Ernie asked.

I shook my head.

"Come on," he coaxed. "What could possibly be wrong? We're away from the headshed, on temporary duty, we have a pocket full of travel pay, and we're surrounded by booze and bands and business girls. What more could you possibly want?"

"A clue," I answered.

"A clue?"

"A clue as to who murdered Miss O Sung-hee."

Ernie shrugged. "Maybe the KNPs were right all along. Maybe it was Rothenberg."

And maybe not.

When the midnight curfew came along, G.I.'s either scurried back to Camp Colbern or paired up with a Korean business girl. Ernie found one for me, and the four of us went to their rooms upstairs in some dive. In the dark, I lay next to the girl. Ignoring her. Finally, I slept.

Just before dawn, a cock crowed. I sat up. The business girl was still asleep, snoring softly. I rose from the low bed and slipped on my clothes, and without bothering to wake Ernie, I walked over to the Korean National Police station.

The sun was higher when I returned. After gathering the information I needed at the police station, I'd walked over to Camp Colbern. There, in the billeting room assigned to me and Ernie, I'd showered, shaved, and then gone to the Camp Colbern snack bar. Breakfast was ham, eggs, and an English muffin. Now, back in Paldang-ni, I pounded on the door to Ernie's room. The business girl opened it and let me in. Ernie was still asleep.

"Reveille," I said.

He opened his eyes and sat up. "What?"

"Time to make morning formation, Sleeping Beauty."

"Why? We don't know who killed Miss O, so what difference does it make?"

"We know now."

"We do?"

I filled him in on the testimony I'd received this morning from Private First Class Everett P. Rothenberg. When I finished, Ernie thought about it. "You and your Korean customs. Why would that mean anything to anybody?"

"Get up," I told him. "We have someone to talk to."

Ernie grumbled but dressed quickly.

We wound our way through the narrow alleys of Paldang-ni. Instead of American G.I.'s and Korean business girls, the streets were now filled with children in black uniforms toting heavy backpacks on their way to school and farmers shoving carts piled high with garlic or cabbage or mounds of round Korean pears. We passed the Dragon Lady Teahouse, and just to be sure, I checked the doors, both front and back. Locked tight. Then we continued through the winding maze, heading toward the hooch of Miss Kang.

What I'd questioned Rothenberg about this morning concerned his friendship with Miss Kang. How they'd both sat up nights in the hooch waiting for Miss O. But Miss O would stay out after curfew and then not come home at four in the morning and often Rothenberg had to go to work before he knew what had happened to her. But sometimes she'd be back early with some story about how she stayed at a friend's house and how they were having so much fun talking and playing flower cards that the time had slipped by and she hadn't realized that midnight had come and gone and she'd been trapped until after curfew lifted at four in the morning.

"You knew it was all lies, didn't you?" I asked.

Rothenberg allowed his head to sag. "I guess I did."

"But Miss Kang knew for sure."

"Yeah," Rothenberg said. "Miss O had a lot of boyfriends. I realize that now."

Private Everett P. Rothenberg went on to tell me that sometimes Miss O made both him and Miss Kang leave the hooch completely.

"She'd tell us that family was coming over for the weekend. And she didn't want them to know that a G.I. like me was staying in her hooch. So Miss Kang helped out, she took me to her father's home near Yoju. It was about a thirty-minute bus ride. When we arrived at her father's home they were real friendly to me. I'd take off my shoes and enter the house and bow three times to her father like Miss Kang taught me. You know, on your knees and everything."

"You took gifts?"

"Right. Miss Kang made me buy fruit. She said it's against Korean custom to go 'empty hands.'"

"And you prayed to her ancestors?"

"Some old photographs of a man and a woman."

"And you went to their graves?"

"How'd you know? To the grave mounds on the side of the hill. We took rice cakes out there and offered them to the spirits. When the spirits didn't eat them, me and Miss Kang did." He laughed. "She always told me that food offered to the spirits has no taste. Why? Because the spirits take the flavor out of it and all you're left with is the dough."

"Is that true?"

"It was for me. But I never liked rice cakes to begin with."

I stared at Rothenberg a long time. Finally, he fidgeted.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "If you think there was something between me and Miss Kang, you're wrong. Sung-hee is my girl. Miss O. I was faithful to her."

"You were," I said softly.
His head drooped. "Right," he said. "I was."

Miss Kang wasn't in her hooch.

"She go pray," the landlady told us.

"At the shrine at the top of the hill," I said, pointing toward the Namhan River.

Her eyes widened. "How you know?"

I shrugged. Ernie and I thanked her, walked back through the village, and started up the narrow trail that led out of Paldang-ni, over the hills, and eventually to the banks of the Namhan River. On the way, we passed the bronze bell. It still hadn't been moved and sat amongst a pile of rotted lumber.

At the top of the hill, we found her. She squatted on the stone platform of the shrine, just below where the bell would've been. Ernie walked up to her quickly, shoved her upright, pressed her against one of the wooden support beams, and frisked her. He tossed out a wallet, keys, some loose change, and finally an Army-issue bayonet.

Miss Kang squatted back down, covering her face with her hands. Narrow shoulders heaved. She was crying.

Ernie backed away, rolling his eyes, exasperated.

After she shed a few more tears, maybe she'd open up to us. I was about to whisper to Ernie to be patient when, behind me, a pebble clattered against stone. Ernie was too busy staring at the quivering form of Miss Kang to notice. As I turned, something dark exploded out of the night.

Ernie shouted.

For a moment, I was gone. Darkness, bright lights, and then more bright lights. I felt myself reeling backward and then I hit something hard and I willed my mind to clear. The darkness gave way to blurred vision. Ernie slapped me on the cheek.

"Sueño, can you stand?"

I stood up.

"Come on. He hit you with some sort of club and when I lunged at him I tripped on this stupid stone platform. He and Kang took off."

"Who?"

"Mr. Shin."

I followed Ernie's pointing finger. Fuzzy vision slowly focused. The early morning haze had lifted, and more sunlight filtered through bushes and low trees. In the distance, two figures sprinted down the pathway, heading back toward Paldang-ni.

"Come on!" I shouted.

"My sentiments exactly," Ernie said. "But watch out. She took the bayonet."

And then we were after them.

A crowd had gathered in the central square of Paldang-ni. It was like a small park, surrounded on either side by produce vendors, fishmongers, and butcher shops. No lawn, but a few carefully tended rose bushes were ringed by small rocks. Under the shade of an ancient oak tree, old men wearing traditional white pantaloons, blue silk vests, and knitted horsehair hats squatted on their heels and smoked tobacco from long-stemmed pipes. Groups of them gathered around wooden boards playing *changki*, Korean chess.

Halabojis they were called. Grandfathers.

One *halaboji*'s horsehair hat had fallen into the dust. So had his long-stemmed pipe. Shin held him, his back pressed firmly against the trunk of the old oak. Miss Kang stood next to him, the sharp tip of her bayonet pressed against the loose flesh of the grandfather's neck.

"Get back!" she screamed at me in English. "We'll kill him."

I stood with my arms to my side. Ernie paced a few cautious steps away to my left. I knew what he was thinking. Could he pull his .45 and take a clear shot at Kang's head before she could slice the old man's throat? But at that distance, over ten yards, it would be risky.

"Put the knife down," I told Miss Kang.

"Go away!" she shouted. "My brother and I will leave Paldang-ni. We'll never come back."

A crowd of local citizens had started to gather. Their mouths were open, shocked at what they were seeing. Elders were revered in Korea, never abused like this. Mumbled curses erupted from the crowd.

"The KNP's are on the way," I said. "Put the knife down."

Of course I had no idea if the KNP's had been alerted, but they would be soon. Ernie was inching farther to the left, attempting to evade Kang's direct line of sight. I had to stall for time, before Ernie chanced a shot or Miss Kang decided that one less grandfather wouldn't be missed one way or the other.

"You had good reason for what you did," I told Miss Kang.

Her eyes widened. Perspiration flowed down her wrinkled forehead, forming a puddle beneath her eyes. "Yes," she said, surprised. "That's what I told my brother. I had good reason. Miss O made me do it."

People were shutting down produce stands now, running to the back of the crowd to stand on tiptoes to see what was going on.

Miss Kang kept talking. "She was using him."

"Who?" I asked.

"Miss O. She was using Everett."

She meant Private Rothenberg. "How so?" I asked.

"She tricked him. Took his money. Never slept with him. Only had fun, changing from one boyfriend to another. Making me leave my own room. Never paying her share of the rent. So I took Everett. I was nice to him. He met my family. He prayed at our grave mounds. He liked me."

Using her free hand, the one without the bayonet, Miss Kang wiped flowing perspiration from her eyes and stared directly at me. "He liked me. I know he did."

"But you talked to Miss O one night. Atop the hill at the shrine with the bronze bell. You argued."

"No!" Miss Kang shook her head vehemently. "We didn't argue. I told Miss O about everything she did wrong. She didn't argue. She agreed. She knew she was doing wrong. But after I told her everything and told her she should leave Everett alone, she laughed at me."

Miss Kang stood incredulous, lost in her own story. Lost in the memory of the unbridled temerity of the arrogant Miss O Sung-hee. "She said that she would take Everett's money and use him for as long as she wanted to and there was nothing I could do about it."

Shin looked about frantically, knowing that as the crowd grew his chance of escape grew less. He shouted at his sister to shut up. Her head snapped back toward him.

Ernie by now had the position he wanted, on the extreme left of Shin's peripheral vision. He reached inside his jacket and unhooked the leather shoulder holster of his .45. Miss Kang's head was bobbing around, while the old man leaned his skull backwards, trying to avoid the sharp tip of the bayonet that pointed into his neck. Tears rolled down the *halaboji's* face.

Maybe it was the sight of these tears that enraged the crowd most. Whatever it was, suddenly a barrage of garlic cloves was heaved out of the crowd. They smacked the trunk of the oak tree, barely missing Shin and the old man. Enraged, Miss Kang shouted back at them to stop. The crowd roared. This time it was a head of Napa cabbage that exploded at Kang's feet. She hopped. Ernie pulled his .45, held it with both hands in front of him. Still no shot. I took a couple of steps forward. Miss Kang swung the tip of the bayonet my way.

That was the signal for the crowd to unleash its rage. Amidst shouts of anger, more produce flew at Shin and the grandfather and Miss Kang. Garlic, persimmons, fat pears, even a few dead mackerel.

Then the enraged citizens of Paldang-ni surged forward. Ernie raised the barrel of his .45 toward the sky, holding his fire. I tried to run at Miss Kang, but a woman bumped me, and to avoid falling on top of her, I slowed. The entire mob pushed forward, some of them brandishing sticks, some hoes, some with nothing more than their bare fists.

For a second, Miss Kang held her ground. Her eyes were wide with fright, her bayonet pointed forward. But then, like a swimmer being drowned by a tidal wave, the crowd enveloped her. Shin screamed and let go of the old man and tried to run. He didn't get far.

Fifty people surrounded the old oak tree. Kicking, screeching, pummeling.

Ernie fired a shot into the air. No one seemed to notice. Rounding a corner at the edge of the square, a phalanx of KNPs ran across pounded earth. Wielding riot batons, swinging freely, they forced the crowd to disperse.

Only Miss Kang and Mr. Shin lay in the dust. Shin was hurt. His leg was broken—a compound fracture—and maybe an arm. I knelt next to Miss Kang Mi-ryul. Her nose was bashed in, the one she'd pointed to only yesterday. Also bashed in was her forehead and the side of her skull. Using my forefinger and thumb, I pinched the flesh above her carotid artery. The skin was still warm but the flow of blood, the force of life-giving fluid, had stopped.

Back at 8th Army I typed up my report. Private First Class Everett P. Rothenberg had already been released by the Korean National Police. Mr. Shin, the pool player, had been taken to a hospital and was recovering nicely, although he was facing hard time for the Korean legal equivalents of aggravated assault and aiding and abetting a murderess.

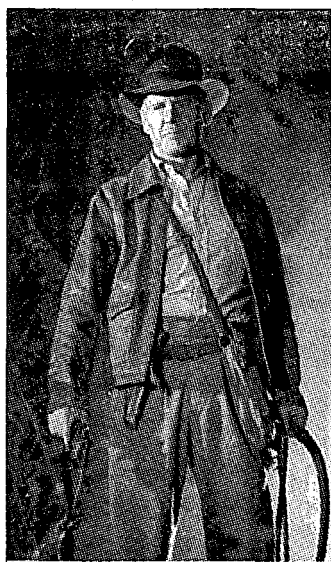
Miss O Sung-hee was scheduled to be buried by her family in a grave mound back in Kwangju. Miss Kang Mi-ryul, on the other hand, would be cremated. That's all her family could afford.

What they did with her ashes, I never knew. 🐦

REEL CRIME

J. RENTILLY

Color this summer green. Really green. Whereas last summer was all about the swordplay and magic wands, and the summer months are, historically, when the studios rake in the most greenbacks, this season we've got a green—as in eco—thriller from M. Night Shyamalan, a green comic book hero from Edward Norton, and a high-finance conspiracy thriller from the director of *Run Lola Run*. Which isn't to deny that the summer films—the sequels, TV-to-movie makeovers, and high concept extravaganzas—are simply banking on big numbers and boffo business. Sight unseen, no one can yet testify to the quality of the below-listed films, but to say, books by the covers, these are the best bets for discriminating audiences who favor wit with their spectacle, chills with their spills, mystery with their mayhem, and suspense with their sensory overload. And just for fun, why not catch Maxwell Smart back in action again?



Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull

The fall of Communism and the Iron Curtain. The Internet. The Los Angeles riots. Harry Potter and the wizards of Hogwarts. OJ Simpson. September 11. Ubiquitous iPods. Saddam Hussein. Harrison Ford's sixty-fifth birthday. These are just a few of the things that have happened since Indiana Jones last unspooled his swashbuckling heroics in movie theaters. Kids who were born in 1989, when *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was released, will be able to vote for the first time this November. *That's* how long it's been since we last saw

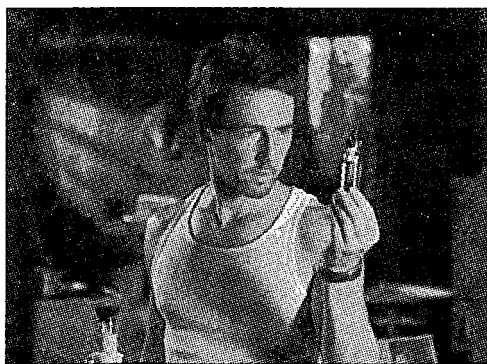
the good Dr. Jones. And you know what? We can hardly wait, breathless as we are at the return of Indy's first love, Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen), the addition of Cate Blanchett as a torture-fetishist villain, and rumors that Indy and son (Shia LeBeouf) will circle the globe to get to a fallen alien spacecraft before the nasty Russians do. Cliffhanging is never more fun than when Steven Spielberg is at the helm of an Indiana Jones film—even if it took eighteen years and no less than a dozen stabs at the screenplay to come to make that famous bullwhip crack again. *May 23*

The Happening

Once upon a time, with films like *Unbreakable* and *Signs*, writer and director M. Night Shyamalan had a sixth sense about how to engage, haunt, and captivate moviegoers' imaginations. But by the time he butted heads with the studio chiefs over the critically reviled *Lady in the Water* and endured a none-too-flattering biographical book, it seemed like the day was done for Night. With *The Happening*, Night goes green, mixing inconvenient truths about environmental catastrophe with mind control and invading aliens. Will audiences bite or balk at Night's attempted renaissance? Mark Wahlberg and Zooey Deschanel star. *June 13*

The Incredible Hulk

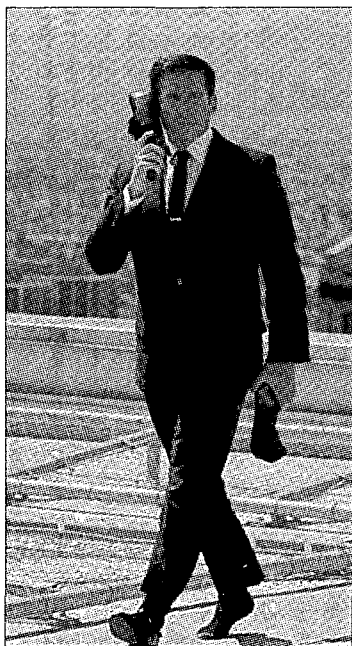
Also going green this summer is Oscar-nominated actor Edward Norton. An indie-film stalwart, Norton is perhaps an unlikely



comic book superhero, but he brought his formidable street cred and writing chops to this Marvel Comics adaptation. (Zak Penn is the film's credited screenwriter). Directed by nouveau action maestro Louis Leterrier (*Transporter*), a disciple of Luc Besson, this *Hulk* is action-packed—in stark

contrast to Ang Lee's contemplative, psycho-drama-heavy *Hulk* a few years back—and poised to rake in the green. Lots of it. *June 13*





Get Smart

Would you believe . . . Almost two decades after bumbling secret agent Maxwell Smart—the anti-James Bond—last appeared on television, and twenty-five years after he exploded across the big screen in *The Nude Bomb*, Agent 86 is back in action. The fact that the film is scripted by Tom Astle and Matt Ember, the gentlemen behind the abysmal *Failure to Launch*, and directed by Adam Sandler go-to guy Peter Segal has us a little uneasy that there might be more KAOS than CONTROL in this incarnation, but we're uber-pleased to see *The Office*'s Steve Carell stepping into original Smart Don Adams's shoe-phone.

June 20

Mad Detective (Sun taam)

Helmed by Johnnie To, the Jerry Bruckheimer of Hong Kong, here's an art-house alternative to the broad, noisy summer films of, uh, the Jerry Bruckheimer of Hollywood. A Hong Kong variation on *Silence of the Lambs*, *Mad Detective* follows a rookie cop on his quest to hunt down a serial killer. Sure, it sounds like every other serial killer flick released in the past twenty years, but that's failing to give proper credit to To, who is a film artist of the highest caliber. Prepare to go into the darkness. Deep into the darkness. June 25

Wanted

Stop us if you've heard the one about the innocent young man drawn into his father's shadowy, illicit underworld, who can only truly come of age by squaring his old man's unfinished business. Now forget that you've seen that movie ten times already, and think Morgan Freeman, James McAvoy, and Angelina Jolie in the cast, directed by the visually adept but character-driven director Timur Bekmambetov (*Night Watch*), based on the visceral, filthy graphic novel of the same name. Now *Wanted* is on our want-to-see list. June 27



The Dark Knight

Much like Tim Burton before him, Chris Nolan took the world by surprise when he nimbly employed his rich, psychotic touches in service of the Batman film franchise. Nolan, best known for *Memento*, made the best Batman film of the lot, 2005's *Batman Begins*, drafting a plausible, even moving backstory for our dark

hero, delivering all the requisite chills and spills, but with enough psychological detail to render the entire effort somehow resonant and meaningful. The shocking, untimely death of Heath Ledger, here playing The Joker, is likely to loom large over the film's release, but we're in line for this one already. *July 18*

The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor

This glossy franchise has always felt like the poor man's *Indiana Jones*, rich as they are with wink-wink humor and proficient special fx, so it'll be interesting how this third installment stacks up against the return of the real Dr. Jones. Hard to say if this is merely a disposable, big-paycheck gig for stars Brendan Fraser and Maria Bello, or if the story—centering on the mummy of China's first emperor, here played by Jet Li—will, uh, wrap us up. Hey, it's August. It'll be air-conditioned anyway. *August 1*

Blindness

Based on Jose Saramago's acclaimed novel about a contemporary city brought to the brink of total collapse by a mysterious epidemic of blindness, this one's got an excellent pedigree and a stellar creative team. Starring Mark Ruffalo, Julianne Moore, and Gael Garcia Bernal, directed by Fernando Meirelles (*The Constant Gardener*), *Blindness* is a thinking-man's thriller, a chilling modern myth, a dose of poetry in a comic book summer. *August 8*

The International

A decade ago, Tom Tykwer breathed new life into the action film genre with *Run Lola Run*, an exhilarating, philosophically-hefty blast of adrenaline and Butterfly Effect pontificating. In this big studio thriller, Tykwer shows Clive Owen and Naomi Watts through the (presumably breathtaking) paces of greed, corruption, conspiracy, and international finances. This one's for the grown-ups—sleek, clever, and intelligent. *August 15*



TOM WASP AND THE TOWER OF LONDON

AMY MYERS

It isn't often a chimney sweep takes a hand in affairs of state, but today, admiring Her Majesty's Fortress, the Tower of London, in the morning's grey dawn, I was minded of the occasion on which I, Tom Wasp, had been so honoured.

"Do you think Queen Victoria ever heard how we saved her crown jewels for her, Ned?" Ned's my chummy and a stalwart friend for all his tender eleven years. He thought for a moment.

"No, guv," he said at last, worldly wise. "But we know what we did, so what's it matter?" He was right, of course, and after our little adventure they began to plan a safer place to keep the jewels, which was reward enough in itself.

Our story began on a foggy morning so damp and wet I never thought a living soul would hear our cry of "Sweep! Sweep!" let alone the deputy Keeper of Her Majesty's Crown Jewels in England's great fortress. Most agitated was George Hardcastle as we passed through the Byward Tower with its ancient portcullis, past the great White Tower, and over to the steps that led up to the keeper's apartments. These were in the Martin Tower at a corner of the inner wall of old fortifications and next to the entrance to the Jewel House. That was where Queen Victoria kept all her golden regalia, the symbol of England's glory. Since to see these splendid objects costs a whole sixpence, I had never seen them myself but greatly longed to do so.

"Ghosts, sweepie!" Mr. Hardcastle explained gloomily. "It's my belief they've been at the keeper's chimney again."

I made haste to assure him that I was well practised in the removal of ghosts from flues. It was true, even though Ned's mouth dropped open at this statement. With all the chimneys I've swept with my old Smart's cleaning machine, I ain't yet encoun-

tered a ghost stuck halfway up, which surely proves they flee at the sight of my brushes. So I decided I'd oblige Mr. Hardcastle. He led me through the Martin Tower entrance, pointing out the chamber to our left, where the crown jewels used to be kept until the great fire of 1841. As the Keeper of the Jewels was temporarily absent, he, the deputy, had the honour of being their official guardian—hence his desire, I realised, to ensure no ghosts sullied the keeper's chimney.

"Queen Anne Boleyn, would this ghost be?" I enquired, as we walked up the stairs. Ned looked up hopefully. He's never seen a queen, let alone a dead one stuck up a chimney. George Hardcastle was an old colour sergeant, he told me, wounded in the Crimea, and so it had surprised me to hear him talk of ghosts, but it seemed he was serious.

"It's my belief her evil spirit's living in that chimney," he agreed, as he plodded into the sitting room, where a large chimney piece stuck out far into the room, with a small fireplace surmounted by a mantelshef, awaited us. "She sent down a creepy white thing last night to tell us she was about to walk abroad again. She was imprisoned here, so it's natural enough she'd want to make her home in the same chimney," he explained.

The room was pleasant enough, former prison or not, and possessed two windows, both cut eight or nine feet deep into the solid Tower wall. Mrs. Hardcastle bustled forward to greet us. "Nonsense, George," she addressed her husband briskly. "You know the old queen doesn't have her head any more. It was chopped off by that husband of hers, Henry VIII. So when she walks abroad, she shouldn't have any head; yet the ghost the folks here have seen walking these last few nights has some sort of head. Anyway, Anne Boleyn wouldn't go around killing people. You're just scaring this lad with such crazy talk of dead queens. Our ghost's probably quite different to Anne Boleyn's. It's most likely Henry VIII himself, looking for his poor dead lady. Like a pie, young man?"

At this thoughtful offer, Ned took to her immediately, despite this foolishness about ghosts. I didn't like the sound of what I'd heard though.

"Killing people?" I asked cautiously. It had been my belief that Tower Green was no longer used to chop heads off.

"One of our tower sentries found dead last night," George Hardcastle said heavily. "Two of them were guarding the jewels outside the Jewel House last evening, when the ghost walked abroad. One fled, the other poor soul died of fright. There's been talk of phantoms for a while now, and one of them's hiding out in

that chimney, you mark my words, sweepie. That fire wouldn't take this morning, and that's because it fair shivered at what it saw above it. Your job's to make sure that what's in our chimney goes up and not down."

"I can still smell it up there," Mrs. Hardcastle declared, hand clasped to plump bosom.

I peered earnestly up the narrow flue but all I smelled was the usual London fog. This being the season when good fires begin to be kept, the chimney was probably still damp, and trapped some fog within it. But when I told Mr. Hardcastle so and assured him this was probably the explanation of his creepy white ghost, he shook his head dubiously.

"It's happened before, you see, and now it's back. In the old days, before my time. It was well over forty years ago when it first walked—1817; the year stuck in my mind as being only two years after Waterloo when we thrashed those Frenchies good and proper. And now there's another Emperor Napoléon on the throne of France. No good will come of that, for all he likes to pretend he's pally with Britain. It's too much of a coincidence, sweepie, there being two Napoléons involved with this ghost."

"What happened the first time?" I enquired, seeing he was all ready to tell me anyway.

"Mr. Swifté, he being the Keeper of the Crown Jewels then, was living here in the Martin Tower. He was dining nice and quiet with his wife and two friends when all of sudden a column of white, in the shape of a most fearful phantom, all chill and cold, appeared over their tabletop, then jumped on poor Mrs. Swifté, seized hold of her shoulder, and then made off after Mr. Swifté bravely threw a chair at it. Well, Mrs. Swifté, she escaped lightly, for the poor sentries down below were attacked by a great white bear of a ghost who slithered under the Martin Tower door to reach them. One took to his heels, and the other poor soul died of fright. Just like last night, you see.

"There were investigations of course, but the authorities could find no other explanation either of Mr. Swifté's nasty phantom nor the ghostly bear. No phantasmagorical equipment could have been set up, nor could the phantom have been a column of fog trapped in the chimney, as some tried to maintain. That was disproved too. So when I heard all this talk of Anne Boleyn's ghost walking these last few nights, and saw this puff of white coming out of this chimney last night, as she got her skirt ready to walk abroad, I didn't wait for any more of the spectre to come slithering out, whether it was a royal ghost or not up there. I read it a few words of Scripture, and back it must have gone, for it never

came out again. We kept a good fire and told it to sizzle and die like the phantom of hell it was. But something must have escaped through the top nevertheless, for Anne Boleyn walked all right last night, and I reckon she's back in her nest in this chimney right now."

I tried hard to make sense of this. Whether there were evil spirits in this chimney or not, there certainly seemed to have been a dead body as a result, and that needed to be treated with respect. "Was it a bear killed the sentry last night?" I asked seriously.

"No, sweepie. It were Anne Boleyn on her way to see her crown. There's plenty here saw her, poor lady, crossing the yard and coming up to the iron gates of the Jewel House. She had her day of glory at her coronation and wanted to see her crown again, not knowing it isn't there."

Now this was serious. "Stolen?" I asked sharply.

"In a way, sweepie. Most of the regalia was melted down when Oliver Cromwell and his gang chopped the king's head off years ago, and set up a republic. The next king had to make another set before he could be crowned. So last night Anne Boleyn had all her trouble for nothing, and it's my belief that's why she killed the sentry."

"You said he died of fright," I reminded him.

"There were marks of hands round his neck," Mr. Hardcastle admitted darkly. "She tried to twist off his head, I reckon, jealous because he had one and she didn't. Or else she thought he'd stolen her crown. So it comes to the same thing: He died of fright."

"But it was murder."

"Even if it was," Mr. Hardcastle said reasonably, "she's died once, and even the queen's military can't condemn a lady to death twice. Anyway, they arrested the other sentry, even though I told them it was the ghost that did it."

"How did the ghost get in to see her jewels?" I asked, deeply interested in this problem. "Steal the sentry's keys, did she?"

Mr. Hardcastle regarded me pityingly. "She's a ghost, sweepie. She can walk straight through gates and doors. Anyway, the sentries don't have the keys. I have the keeper's keys at the moment. And she only wanted to look at her crown, not steal it. Which is just as well because no one has a key to get at the jewels themselves, only the outer gates and the chamber door."

"No one?" I enquired. This seemed somewhat strange.

"Almost no one," he amended. "When the armouries, which were on the other side of this tower stretching way along where the barracks do now, were burned down in 1841, this old tower nearly went with it, crown jewels and all. And do you know why,

sweepie? Because there was no key to the jewel case available. The only key was held by the Lord Chamberlain himself and he was asleep in his bed in Saint James's miles away. Well, the old fire was raging away, so a group of tower men rushed in to save the jewels, fire or no fire. They had to bend the iron bars of the cage by hand, so that a policeman could squeeze in to hand out the regalia. His clothes were afire, but he wouldn't leave his post, not till he'd handed over the last piece. A good servant to His then Majesty, he was. Nowadays the keeper holds the only key on the Lord Chamberlain's behalf so that won't happen again."

"And Anne Boleyn's ghost didn't trouble you for any of the keys, you being the keeper's deputy?" I asked mildly. Mr. Hardcastle seemed to think I jested, for he glanced at me sharply.

"No one troubles me for them, sweepie, and only I know where they are." By the way he glanced down at his shirt I had a good notion, too, but didn't like to mention this. "Here's the chimney, sweepie," Mr. Hardcastle said firmly, obviously thinking this was quite enough talk about keys, "and don't you go telling me my ghost's just a column of fog. I tell you, Anne Boleyn's hiding up there."

"She wears a big skirt," Ned piped up solemnly. "It would get stuck."

"The lad's right, George," his wife assured him. "That proves it's not her but an evil spirit of hell come to torment us."

I decided it was time for Ned to put his tuggy cloth over the chimney so we could get started.

"Tell me, Mr. Hardcastle," I asked casually, as Ned did so. "What does Queen Anne Boleyn look like—transparent?"

"From all accounts, she shimmers and hovers."

I tut-tutted. "Poor lady. Does she *always* have her head when she walks?"

He hesitated. "Bits of it, I'm told. I haven't seen her myself."

Bits of it? This interested me even more, but Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle were looking meaningfully at the chimney, anxious not to talk about ghosts, but to get rid of the one they had. I poked my head up the chimney, murmuring ooh and ah and humming like any physician while I summed up the problem. Then I got my machine working and did the cleaning.

"There's been something very nasty here all right," I pronounced diplomatically, when the process was over. Again I spoke the truth. There had been some very nasty smelly soot, which comes of unpleasant rubbish being put on the fire. "You'll have no more trouble, Mr. Hardcastle," I assured him. "Keep a small fire going to scare the lady away. Smoke her out like wasps and bees."

"I'm grateful to you, sweepie. Here's your sixpence." A silver piece was duly handed over to me, and Mrs. Hardcastle beamed with relief that she need fear no more.

I coughed politely. "No further attack on the jewels is expected then? Extra guards, are there? I might have got rid of your little problem here, but suppose Anne Boleyn is walking to *warn* you of an attack on her jewels?"

I thought this most cunning of me, but Mr. Hardcastle merely looked surprised. "Don't you fret about Her Majesty's Crown Jewels, sweepie. There's no safer place than the Tower of London. Every door is locked up at ten o'clock prompt, and the old portcullis in the Byward Tower is ready to come down if those Frenchies decide to invade or make a bid to storm the Jewel House. Not that that's likely."

"No extra guards, then?"

"Perhaps, sweepie," he said with heavy irony, "you'd like to see for yourself just how safe those jewels are. Just to check I'm doing my job."

"Why, that's mighty kind of you," I accepted amiably. "Ned would enjoy that, too, wouldn't you, Ned?"

"Yes, guv." Ned looked wistfully at the hospitable Mrs. Hardcastle in the hope of another pie, but he knows his duty, does Ned.

Mr. Hardcastle looked taken aback, but reluctantly agreed we could join the first visit of the day, now assembling outside the Jewel House entrance, so down we all went. Perhaps he thought I was planning a robbery of the jewels myself, for he stayed close at my side. He explained what we were doing there to the Yeoman of the Guard, whose job it was to take visitors round on behalf of the official Lady Exhibitor of the Jewels.

The yeoman was a jolly-looking fellow called Arthur, and Ned and I took to him immediately. I explained to Ned that this splendidly robed gentleman in scarlet and gold with an equally splendid black hat was unofficially called a Beefeater, but Ned's eyes fixed on the formidable pike he held.

"Is that for killing the beef?" he asked.

I didn't know the answer to this, so I hastily began to talk to Arthur's wife Lily, a small wiry bundle of energy, who told me they had both lived at the tower for many years, and were well used to ghosts.

Arthur firstly assured the assembled company that we need not fear them for they only walked by night, although few here looked as though they feared anything very much. There were several foreign visitors, judging by their voices and strange clothes, a woman and four men, and a gentleman called Mr. Mortmain, who was the

influential Secretary to the Constable of the Tower himself. Secretary or not, he looked as slimy as Black Daniel at the Paddy Goose Pub. As Mr. Hardcastle explained our presence, Mr. Mortmain turned away, averting his eyes from our black faces and holding his nose from our smell. A gentleman indeed.

Lily didn't seem to mind our smell. As she was one of the tower cleaners, she was used to dirt, she said. She might be advancing in years, but she was determined not to give up her job, and came on every single group visit she could in case one of the visitors dropped rubbish that needed clearing up.

"What would Her Majesty say if I stopped working before her?" she pointed out. "The young folks of today don't know one end of a broom from the other. Her Majesty and I work together, see; she owns the tower and I clean it. We're a team."

"Did you see Anne Boleyn's ghost last night?" I asked her. If this sensible lady had seen her, I had some hard thinking to do, especially as I ran my eye over the group once more.

She eyed me. "I saw her, Mr. Wasp." She had been polite enough to enquire my name. "Just going home I was, when she passed me glowing in the dark. I ran home to tell Arthur there might be trouble, but by the time he got here it was too late. She'd gone, and the poor soldier was lying dead."

Before I could enquire further, Beefeater Arthur led the group through the gates and into the dark chamber where the jewels were kept. We all gathered together by the iron barrier in front of the jewels: men, women, children—and sweeps. We ain't popular in confined spaces, but everyone was so eager to see the jewels that no one protested. The only lighting was from lamps attached to the barrier and facing the jewels, though there was a curtain dividing us from them at present.

And then Arthur pulled back the curtain. We all gasped in wonder. Those golden crowns and other objects gleamed and shone, and the jewels glittered, as if alive behind the iron bars. They shone so bright, it was almost unnatural and I thought how easily fear might spread and turn the normal into something weird and strange. It was almost possible to believe in bears squeezing under doors to kill innocent sentries. I stared at Her Majesty's jewels; there was gold everywhere: crowns, diadems, staffs, sceptres, orbs, crosses, all decorated with precious stone like diamonds, emeralds, and pearls. But most of all, Ned's and my eyes fixed on Queen Victoria's state crown. Why I don't know. It had been made for her coronation, Arthur told us; and there it was, purple velvet, silver, diamonds, sapphires—and one huge uncut but shiny ruby that to my mind put all the other jewels in the shade.

We gazed at it, as Arthur talked of what each glorious golden object was, but our interest was in this crown. And we weren't the only ones. Others' eyes were fixed on it, too, as though it alone held some compelling secret.

"Guv," Ned whispered at my side, pointing to it. "What's that red boiled egg doing in it?"

"That's no boiled egg, young man," my new friend Lily told him. "That's a ruby. Don't you know your Bible? Her Majesty's price is far above rubies."

"Can't she afford anything better then?" Ned was puzzled.

"That ruby," Arthur boomed, seeing everyone's interest fixed on it now, "belonged to the Black Prince, the son of Edward III. He did a lot fighting in France against the French."

"Why did he have a red egg?" Ned's voice piped up.

"It was a present from a king."

"The French king?"

"No. The French didn't like him, because he kept on winning battles against them on their own land. So did Henry V, years later at Agincourt, and he was wearing that ruby in his helmet too. Gave them real good hiding, did Henry. So the ruby has become a sort of symbol for the French; they'd like to have it because it would be like winning those battles after all this time. Revenge, lad, revenge."

I thought there were even more pressing reasons than that for French interest in this ruby now. I'd heard tales in the London docks of how there are many in France want to see the old royal family back on the throne and away with these Bonapartes. What better trick, it occurred to me, than to steal the Queen of England's crown with the Black Prince's ruby in it and bring about bad feeling between our two countries. Napoléon would think its theft a trick by the British to discredit him, and Britain would assume he'd stolen it.

"Would they try to steal this crown then?" Ned asked, round eyed.

There was an eerie silence, broken at last by Arthur's booming laughter.

"There's only been one attempt to steal the crown jewels," he guffawed. "That was hundreds of years ago in the 1600s, when Colonel Blood and his men tried to steal them from the Martin Tower. They were all caught, and the regalia mostly recovered. The remarkable result was that though the keeper was badly injured, Blood's fortune was made. He was summoned by the king and given an income for life. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the world for you. That's life," he finished jovially.

As we all trooped out, I heard a far-from-jovial Arthur draw Mr. Hardcastle aside. "George, keep good watch tonight. I'm not happy, and that's a fact."

George Hardcastle pooh-poohed this notion, assuring Arthur that no one had access to his keys, so Lily put in a word too. "That Anne Boleyn might be back, George," she said.

"Sweepie's taken care of the ghost," George told her smugly.

"Ah, but you can't swear you've caught Anne Boleyn, can you?" Lily asked me sharply.

"No," I answered with relief, hoping this might convince even Mr. Hardcastle.

I saw him looking most unhappy at the thought of that ghost still being around and realised that Ned and I had a chance of serving our queen that evening. "If we might stay here tonight," I offered, "I'd be glad to stay to see that queen doesn't get in here by mistake." And seeing their faces, I added quickly, "Outside of course. Not here with the jewels."

"It's highly irregular," Mr. Hardcastle answered doubtfully.

"So are ghosts," Lily pointed out tartly, and with this in mind he agreed. Ned might sleep on the Martin Tower entrance floor, and I could keep watch over the Jewel House entrance from the steps of the Martin Tower. The Jewel House could not be entered but by the gates. Two new sentries would be outside the Jewel House, I was told, and I promised to keep good watch for any ghostly bears slithering under the Jewel House gates, as well as for Anne Boleyn trying to walk through them.

For the rest of that day I tried to think things through, as Ned and I wandered round to see the other parts of the old tower and marvelled at its history. At last an idea came to me, and convinced it was right, I passed it on to Arthur, as an East End sweep's word would carry little weight with the Colonel of the Regiment responsible for the military guard, let alone the constable himself.

"Just a precaution," I told Arthur gravely.

"And a good one, Mr. Wasp," he agreed heartily.

George Hardcastle was uneasy enough to join me on my watch over the sentries. Fearing there might be dirty work afoot tonight, I sent Ned up to Mrs. Hardcastle, cross though he was at missing the chance of seeing Anne Boleyn. As we stood at the top of the first flight of steps to the Martin Tower, I was glad of George's company, for all I could make out in the darkness were those two stalwart sentries so close. We looked out like kings ourselves upon the old fortress spread out below us. The barracks, with most of the tower regiment within it, was but a stone's throw away. Before us across the way from the Jewel House was the Map Office and

beyond that to the right I could just make out part of the White Tower built by William the Conqueror to keep his enemies away. Would that it still could! In an hour or so the Ceremony of the Keys would take place, and all exits to the tower would be locked. No one could pass in or out until dawn after that, so if the ghost was going to walk she had to do it soon.

Even the tower cannons would have no defence against a ghost. I shivered, wondering at where my thoughts were leading me, for suddenly I was full of fear. It *was* a ghost, emerging from the gap between the Map House and the White Tower and floating towards the Jewel House, shimmering across the ground; it was the glow from a white-clad woman, and other shapes after her, also glowing. Tricks of the light, I told myself, but I knew these were no tricks. I saw no head to her at first, but momentarily it was there, pale and faint. It disappeared once again, and I felt my legs wobble as it reappeared glowing and tucked beneath Her Majesty's arm. As the ghost neared the Jewel House, however, she vanished.

So did the sentries. With a yell they disappeared into the darkness, just as George and I forced ourselves to hurry down the second flight of steps and rush towards the ghosts. There they were, Anne Boleyn shimmering at the Jewel House gates, and one, two, three others. Had she brought her murdering husband Henry VIII with her, together with all his other wives? My reason seemed to have deserted me along with the sentries.

A screech came from George Hardcastle, who had fallen on his knees requesting help from heaven, since the military had departed so completely.

Now the screech was mine, as I reached the first ghost and found it all too solid. It pushed both me and George to the ground, and when we picked ourselves painfully up, the ghosts had gone. They were inside the outer gates set in the facade to the Jewel House, and so were probably already in the chamber itself helping themselves to the jewels.

The ghosts had thoughtfully unlocked the gates for us so George and I were set to rush in after them, but then—as I had arranged with Arthur—all the Queen's regimental guard thundered to the rescue. And a welcome sight they were, even if the first two or three did think we were the villains. That was quickly sorted out and I could stand aside. It was time for George to be the hero now.

Only one of the robbers—for of course that's what the ghosts were—was not caught inside. He came out, still glowing in parts, rushing through the passageway and towards the only exit still

open, through the Byward Tower and out across the moat. But there was no escape there, for the signal had been given for the old portcullis to be lowered, and groaning and rumbling, it was already nearing the ground. The great old tower defences performed their duty as the iron spikes reached down to the earth beneath them or for anyone rash enough to try to slither under them.

Thus the last of the thieves was caught. French royalists, as we'd suspected; all men, one dressed as Anne Boleyn, the others as her ghostly swains. It had been their plan to walk by night for several evenings in a row, so that fear and panic might spread in order to gain them precious minutes for their evil deeds. But on the previous evening, the sentry had been made of stern stuff and chased after them, hence his death, poor man. At least I had helped restore his reputation, but as for his life, I could work no miracles on that.

There was no going home that night. The best brains of Scotland Yard, the colonels and generals of the military, the Constable of the Tower, and George, as deputy Keeper of the Jewels, were gathered together. Were it not for the fact that Arthur swore that I had suggested he tipped them off, it would have gone badly with Ned and me. Even so, they checked our cleaning machine to ensure we had nothing irregular inside.

And why was that? .

Because though the doors to the jewel case were still firmly locked, Queen Victoria's state crown, with the Black Prince's ruby, was missing.

Well, there was a hue and cry inside the tower all that night to find out where the thieves had hidden that crown. I thought they might even be dragging the old torture rack out to interrogate the thieves, so great was the alarm. Every nook and cranny in every building of the Tower of London was searched, everyone roused from their beds for their homes to be torn apart, every suit of armour carefully examined. When that produced nothing, it was agreed the moat would have to be searched on the morrow as the thief must have thrown the crown over the wall. The trouble was that would mean the news would be public, and even Her Majesty Queen Victoria herself might come scurrying over to see how this calamity could have happened.

Mr. Hardcastle was interrogated most thoroughly as to whether his keys had been stolen, in particular that to the jewels themselves, but I was witness that he had his keys with him all the time.

I saw them round his neck as I heaved him to his feet at the Jewel House gate.

At last in the morning, Ned and I were let go. We had a business to run, after all.

"You'll have some breakfast before you go?" Mrs. Hardcastle asked Ned, who answered for both of us.

"Yes please, missis."

The fire in their sitting room was not yet lit. I watched it, half expecting a phantom to appear, but it did not. I had proved there were no ghosts, only human bodies with phosphorous paste and black shawls to hide it when they pleased. Something bothered me, though: Why, if these human ghosts had stolen the crown, did they bother to lock the jewels up again afterwards? And of course there was still the unanswered question: How did the thieves obtain the keys in the first place, both those to the gates and to the jewels?

We were about to leave, greatly distressed at the loss of the crown. Ned was almost crying to think that that lovely red boiled egg had vanished. Then a great shout went up from outside. It was Arthur, banging on the Martin Tower door and yelling his head off. George Hardcastle rushed down, with me hobbling behind on my bowed legs as fast as I could.

Arthur couldn't even speak, so excited was he, and we followed him into the Jewel House chamber, where he just pointed.

The crown was back! And the door to the cage was still locked.

Well, the sentries swore that no one had passed that morning, not since the gates had been locked up after the policemen and military had finished their searches. So how could this have happened? Everyone thought it truly was a phantom this time, and the authorities were so happy the crown was back they didn't enquire too closely into how this came to pass. The crown jeweller came hurrying over to verify the jewels, including the ruby, were all genuine, so no one worried much about how this could have happened.

Except for Tom Wasp.

I was most puzzled as to how this had come about. Could it be a real and public-spirited ghost anxious to help Her Majesty out? I thought not, and therefore there was only one explanation and much more readily believable. I remembered the group I'd visited the chamber with. I remembered curious eyes, greedy eyes, envious eyes—and one pair so proud.

Lily was polishing the big cannons when I found her.

"You put that crown back, didn't you, Lily?" I asked. "In fact, it's my belief you took it too."

"Might have," she agreed. "No harm done, is there?"

"Why, Lily?"

"I heard you talking with Arthur, of course. I thought, What's Her Majesty going to say if her jewels get stolen? You men might catch the villains, but what about my crown?"

"Yours?" I asked, puzzled.

"I've dusted and polished it for nearly thirty years, Mr. Wasp. Every night."

I blinked. "But the exhibitor and the crown jeweller look after them, Lily."

"The exhibitor lady's too high and mighty to clean, and the jeweller's a man," she snorted. "He don't know about dusting and that. I might be only a cleaner, but me and Queen Victoria would see eye to eye about men being useless with a polishing cloth. I keep things nice and bright and twinkling for her. I do it for her and England. Any objections, Mr. Wasp?"

"But where did the crown go last night?" I was truly amazed.

"I didn't like the look of those Frenchies you were talking about with Arthur. So I decided to keep that ruby safe under my eye—or rather under my bed, just in case you were right."

I still didn't understand. "How do you get in?" I asked admiringly. All those safety precautions and Lily just strolls in to borrow the state crown—and then puts it back.

"The sentries are so used to me by now they just open the door up without thinking twice about it. Every floor has to be cleaned after all, even a jewel chamber's, and that exhibitor lady won't do it."

"But the sentries swore no one passed last night or this morning."

"They don't count me, Mr. Wasp. You know how it is."

I do. Sweeps and cleaners aren't persons to be noticed; we are just there, part of the furniture of everyday life for gentlemen. I began to understand now. "But the key to the jewels, Lily. Only the keeper has that."

Lily blushed, but with pride not shame. "Now you're not to let on, see. I was here during that fire in 1841, and saw those jewels in danger all because men can't organise beyond the end of their noses. No one had a key to the jewel case in '41, except that blessed Lord Chamberlain, who didn't live here. So I said to Arthur once the Lord Chamberlain's man came panting along with it, that ain't right. Someone has to look after the queen's property for her. So I says to him you make sure it doesn't happen again. You take an impression of that key while you can, Then we'll have our own, and I can dust and polish those jewels as much as I like."

"But the crown jewels were moved after that to a new home. The key wouldn't fit."

"You're quite correct, Mr. Wasp," Lily said crossly. "Most annoyed I was about that. No idea of security, some people. But it turned out all right. I said to Arthur, someone has to fit the new locks. So while he's working, why don't we take him a nice cup of tea . . . and that's how we got the second impression. It's only right and proper the keeper should have a key, but there's no harm in someone else keeping an eye on Her Majesty's belongings, is there? Who guards the keeper, eh?"

So that was it. It wasn't my business to run the Tower of London. Lily seemed to be doing that just splendidly by herself. Which left but one question. How did the Frenchies get the keys to the gates and presumably—though stopped in time—to the jewels themselves? I thought I knew, but it wasn't my place and I'd no evidence. In his privileged position Mr. Mortmain could have got temporary access to them all one way or another, copied them, and then been prepared to flee with the thieves to avoid questions afterwards. He'd be paid well for his pains, no doubt. He'd had a fright now, so he wouldn't be doing it again. No point my saying anything, though. Or so I thought at first.

Mr. Mortmain stopped me as Ned and I walked out under the now lifted portcullis. "I didn't see you pay your sixpence for that visit to the jewels, sweepie. Hand it over."

I couldn't believe his nerve. "If there's handing over to be done, it's of you," I stoutly said. "You owe this land of ours more than sixpence."

He just laughed. He knew I couldn't prove a thing. "Hand it over, Wasp." He took that sixpence I'd earned so hard by chasing out the ghosts from the keeper's chimney and put it straight in his pocket.

"Ned," I remarked sadly, as we left, "this ain't a fair world."

"No, guv. And it should be."

He was right, as usual. All we can do in life is our best, and just hope for the occasional pie. 🐿

LAW AND ORDER

JAS. R. PETRIN

The mystery—and it was a puzzler—was how Four-Foot Angus came to be wedged in the beer cooler back of the bar at the Rob Roy. “The thing is,” Beemer said to Benny, after leading him around through the storeroom to point out the problem, “he couldn’t of crawled in there by himself. Not with two broken legs.”

“You’re saying he had help,” Benny observed.

“That isn’t the word I would use,” Beemer said, “but I know what you’re getting at. Yeah.”

The way it was constructed, the cooler formed the dividing wall, feeding forward into the bar. One of the compartments was empty, a crisscross of yellow police tape guarding it. Beemer explained how on Sunday morning he had found Four-Foot jammed in the narrow shelf on his back, both knees shoved up under his chin so the door would close. “I phoned it in, crime scene guys were here the whole day.”

“Maybe,” Benny said, getting the sense of it now, “he crawled in there to hide from someone, but whoever it was found him anyway, and *then* they broke his legs.”

“You think?” Beemer said, concentrating, tilting his craggy, close-cropped head. “Before or after they shot him?”

“Oh. They shot him too?”

“Right through the swoosh.”

“The what?”

“The sweatshirt he wore. It’s got that little logo on it?” Beemer formed an imaginary gun with an extended forefinger and made a sharp popping sound with his lips. “Right through the swoosh.”

They stared at the beer fridge a few more moments, then went out through the storeroom and back into the common room of the old Rob Roy. Beemer assumed his usual position against the wall behind the till with his arms crossed. Benny climbed back up on his stool and thoughtfully swirled his Scotch-rocks around.

“Four-Foot,” Benny mused. “Hard to believe.”

“Right through the swoosh.”



"And the cops like you for it, huh?"

"They got no one else."

"He only worked here four or five months, and now he's gone. I got to get used to that."

Beemer said with some irritation, "You'll have to get used to me being gone if the cops come back with a jacket that fits."

"That I could not get used to. I hope you got a story."

"What story? Last night I closed up, drove home, watched the news, went to bed."

"Tell me what was on the news. You know they'll ask you that."

"Why? I couldn't watch the news here?"

"Still."

Beemer scratched his thick neck, remembering. "What's always on? People gettin' killed all over the world. And the drumming."

"Drumming?"

"You notice lately? On the cable? Some monkey hammering a trap set while the anchor's tryin' to read the news. *Sound effects* when they change the camera angle. Sound effects, for cryin' out loud. Zoom! Pow! Like they think you're half in the bag an' they got to snap you out of it. There oughta be a law. I hit the mute button."

"So you didn't hear what they said. You shouldn't have done that."

"Who knew? And besides, I fell asleep right way."

"Which means you found it boring."

"Well, I found the drumming boring."

They didn't speak for a while. There were six, eight customers at the tables, all loners except for two guys drinking in the front corner booth. The TV above the wilted palm flickered and winked, a dark, earnest girl up there reading the financial news: Some CEO nearly wrecked his company and collected a six million dollar performance bonus. Drums and sound effects.

"Maybe," Benny said, "if they send you up you'll get some rest."

"Are you kidding? That stretch I did, the eighteen months, that was the noisiest time of my life. Doors rattling and banging, prisoners moaning and belching, guards hollering and hooting, noises you don't even know what they are and you don't want to know. There's no such thing as a restful prison. It's like a hospital. Lights on all night. Jeez."

"I guess you're right."

"You know I am. Besides, it'd be eighteen *years*, a beef like this. I can't do that kinda time, my age. For sure I'd lose this place."

"I could watch it for you."

"That's not what I mean. I got an issue here. I need to raise some

quick cash. Got a big fat tax bill to pay. That loser Endelman, does my accounting—*used* to do my accounting!—figured I had

He couldn't of crawled in there himself. Not with two broken legs."

some kinda credits an' didn't pay my assessment the last four years. I mean, he told *me* not to pay it. Professional advice. Now it turns out I got to come up with thirteen big

ones or it goes in a tax sale. The Rob Roy." Beemer glowered darkly. "I could shoot that guy."

"You don't want to be overheard saying things like that just now."

Beemer rocked forward from the wall, picked up the bar cloth and wiped an offending mote off the bar. He rinsed the cloth, wrung it out, hung it over the edge of the sink. Dried his hands and leaned against the wall again.

"You're right. It's just I'm ticked off. You pay a guy, a college graduate supposed to know what he's doing, and this happens. And now a dead guy in my fridge."

"I can see how that might frost you."

"You're makin' a joke, right?"

Benny returned his gaze, eyes searching innocently. "What?" Then he got it. "Oh," he said. "Anyway, if the cops like you for it, maybe you need to give them a few more options. You got any idea what might've happened here Saturday night after you left?"

"Not a clue."

"How about this. Four-Foot and some other loogan drop by to rob the place. They get into an argument, some kinda rhubarb, and Four-Foot takes one in the chest. Buddy shoves him in the beer fridge there to tidy up and then leaves. Oh—I didn't ask you. Anything missing?"

"Not that I've noticed. I always empty the till, drop the deposit off on the way home, so there weren't no cash around. Cigarettes were still locked up. Booze—I dunno. Looks like it's all there. You think they wanted to swipe the booze?"

"If they did they would've brought a truck. You take your deliveries at the side, that steel door there, right? Risky for them. A truck is kinda hard to miss, you park it out there on the sidewalk, middle of the night."

"Something smaller, maybe. A van."

"Maybe."

"They break any locks? Any windows?"

"Nope. Nothing's damaged."

The street door opened and Rusty Pepper stepped into the room. A delicately constructed man with thinning red hair and

small, pinched features. He wore black shoes, shiny brown suit pants and a suit jacket that didn't quite match. After a quick, cautious scrutiny of the clientele, he smoothed his hair, then came in short, brisk strides to the end of the bar where Beemer and Benny were. He looked nervous. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I got something for you, Beem," he said under his breath. "Something you need to know. A message from Four-Foot."

"Now it starts," Benny said.

Beemer frowned and raked Pepper with a flinty look up and down. "I'm pretty sure Four-Foot isn't sending too many messages these days."

"No, I guess not," Pepper said. "I heard what happened. But, see, he gave me this on Saturday, only I couldn't get away." Benny and Beemer exchanged glances. Couldn't get away from the VLT machines down at the waterfront casino, Pepper meant. He would never get away from them. Not while the casino doors were open and he still had a coin in his hand. "When I heard what happened, I came as fast as I could."

"So you're here now," Beemer said with a peeved look. "What's this message I need to know, it took you two whole days to deliver it?"

"I'm gonna tell you that," Pepper said. He hesitated. Glanced hopefully at the bottles lined up on the glass shelves against the mirror but didn't get his money out. "You don't have something cold and wet, do you?"

Beemer's eyes gleamed dangerously. "The harbor's cold and wet. If I throw you off the cable wharf, you'll find that out. Now talk to me."

Pepper glanced at Benny uncertainly, as if the message might be privileged. Then he shrugged. "Four-Foot had this for you. Tell the Beem, he says, to check his data line."

Beemer looked at him. One of the customers got up and left, a bus rumbling and roaring past the open door before it swung shut. Then there was silence again.

"That's it?"

Pepper nodded. Shrugged.

"Check my . . . what was it?"

"Check your data line."

"What're you talking about? I got no data line."

"Look, I'm just the messenger here. How do I know what you got—"

"Hold on there, Beem," Benny put in smoothly. "Actually you do." But Pepper was backing away, and Benny reached out a hand

to detain him. "Listen. Was Four-Foot alone when he told you this?"

Pepper blinked his faded blue eyes. "I wasn't paying much attention, tell you the truth. But now's I think of it, he had these two jabonies dogging him."

Benny slid off his stool, got a firmer grip on Pepper's elbow, and steered him gently back to the bar. "Pour Rusty a beer, will you, Beem? A guy thinks better with a beer in front of him."

"Imported would be nice," Pepper said.

Beemer sighed.

"Now, about these two loogans," Benny went on, "try and remember. Did you know them at all? Ever see them before?"

"No, no. Can't say I did." Pepper took the Löwenbräu Beemer shoved at him, raised it to his lips, ignoring the glass, and took three big swallows with his eyes half open. He lowered the half empty bottle and said, "Well, maybe the one guy—sort of."

"Sort of? What's that supposed to mean?" Beemer rumbled.

Benny lifted a calming hand at Beemer, then continued with Pepper smoothly. "So you must've looked them over a little—glanced up from your machine. Maybe you can describe them. Where'd you know the one guy from?"

Pepper passed a hand over his thinning hair. "Might've seen him around there, the casino." He thought a minute, then nodded. "Yeah, yeah, seen him a few times, matters-a-fact. Thin as a skeleton. Little round glasses. Teeth a yard long when he shows them. Looked like—I dunno . . ."

"A death's head?" Beemer suggested.

"Yeah. Like that. Other guy was big all the way through, and hairy. One of those furry guys." He thought some more. "South shore, the thin one, I think. Maybe Liverpool. Had that accent."

"Not from Boston?"

"I don't think so. A Mainer maybe."

"Did Four-Foot seem upset to you?"

Pepper frowned. His beer was practically gone. "Yeah. Yeah, you might say that. The way it happened, him passing me this message, it's like he'd broke away from those two guys for a minute. Like he didn't want them to hear what he said. He was glancing back at them, the two guys staring around in the entrance, looking bent, wondering where he'd got to."

"Nervous," Beemer said to Benny, "it sounds like. And why not, with Death's Head and Bongo the circus bear after him." He said to Pepper, "You knew Four-Foot?"

"Pretty well, I guess, at one time. He'd been having, you know, a rough time of it. Lost his job at Bowater. A good job. You

couldn't've beaten it in the navy. Then, not long after, he got advertised. Wrote up in the newspaper. His old lady naming him there, saying she's not responsible for his debts no more."

"Gambling?"

"He couldn't stop. Outta control, that guy."

Beemer sneered and rolled his eyes.

Pepper drained the last of his beer, propped the bottle wistfully between his thin fingertips a moment, then announced with finality, "An' that's about all I can tell you." He slid off his stool, nodded curtly, trotted to the door, and went out.

"Pitter-patter," Benny said.

"Busy boy. Left a hot machine to zoom over here when he finally remembered," Beemer said. "A machine'll pay off when it's hot."

"Or when it's cold."

"They all pay off, don't they?"

"All the time. That's why the casino's so poor." Benny turned back to Beemer. "Did you know about Four-Foot losing his day job?"

Beemer took Pepper's bottle away, mopped the bar, and frowned thoughtfully. "He never mentioned it. When I took him on here, evenings, all he said was he needed some extra cash." He wrung the cloth out, folded it, hung it over the edge of the sink. "Now what about this data line you're telling me I've got?"

Benny slipped off his stool, came around the end of the bar, and nodded at the credit card reader sitting next to the till. "You don't read your phone bill? This is hooked to a data line. How else you gonna do a transaction?"

Beemer scowled at the gadget, his brow forced into ropy ridges.

"I guess you're right. I never thought of that."

"So what we gotta do," Benny said, "is figure out what exactly Four-Foot was trying to tell you."

Benny lifted the reader a few inches in the air, turned it over, and inspected the underside. Then he set it back on the counter-top. He dropped down on his haunches, took the connecting cable in his fingers, and traced it back down under the cabinetry. He said, his voice sounding hollow and muted down there, "Hard to see, but it goes into a kinda phone jack here. Where's your cable entrance?"

"My what?"

"Where do your lines come in?"

"How the hell do I know? Do I look like a phone geek?"

"I'll take a look," Benny said.

He went into the back room, Beemer trailing curiously behind him, and found the cable coming out through the wall from the bar area. From there it was tacked along a trim board to a light-

ning arrestor above the rear exit. Then it disappeared into a notch cut into a panel of the T-bar ceiling.

Benny pushed the panic bar of the rear door, stepped out into the alley, and gazed up at the eaves. "Comes out here, makes a little drip loop, then slopes away up to that pole line there. An' that's as far as I go. I'm not climbing no telephone poles."

He closed the door. Beemer stared at the cable.

"You don't think Pepper made all that up?"

"Not a chance. Not smart enough. He's out of his depth when he raises a sweat, that guy."

"So what was Four-Foot tryin' to tell me then?" Beemer wondered, looking exasperated.

Benny shrugged. "Beats the jake outta me."

"There's nothing wrong with this line?"

"Nothing I can see. 'Course, I'm no expert. You could ask the phone company."

"Ask the phone company an' get a whole lot of attitude. Not happening."

"You just don't want them to find that bootleg TV tap Sanool Jones rigged out there for you."

"That too," Beemer said.

At ten o'clock the law came back with a bunch more questions for Beemer. Detectives. Somber guys in black leather car coats—maybe the coats had been on sale that week. They were known on the street. Steinbesser, thick through the body, bristly gray hair, the man in charge; and Will Beech, quiet and watchful, never a smile out of him, but wheels within wheels up there under his felt cap. Beemer said, "Jeez," when they came through the door. And when he went with them into the storeroom, Benny stepped around the end of the bar to take care of things. There was an old sliding panel in the wall, a sort of pass-through, dating back to when the place had been a Greek restaurant a few hundred years ago. He eased it open an inch. If he stood in Beemer's customary spot and tilted his head back against the wall just right, he could hear the raised voices in there, a little muffled, through the opening.

"... you can think anything you want," Beemer was arguing testily, "I didn't pop the guy, I wasn't even here at the time."

"How'd he get in then?" It was Steinbesser's voice. "Did he have his own private key to the place?"

"You tell me, you went through his pockets."

There was a silence, as if the cops were exchanging irritated glances. Then a softer voice, Will Beech this time: "There's no

entry damage, so we think he had a key. Or else someone was here already. Did you let him in?"

"No."

"If he had a key," Will Beech said, "where'd he get it?"

"How do I know?"

"You didn't give it to him so the two of you could meet here, time-to-time, after hours?"

"Meet here? What for?"

"Just an idea we're pursuing," Steinbesser put in. "A thought I had. A possibility you two had something going. Something profitable. Something beyond running a bar. It went sour here on Saturday night, and your partner came out second best."

"Second best? That's what you call a guy with a bullet in him and two broken legs?"

"Just answer the question."

"First of all, he wasn't my partner. And no, I didn't give him no key. You say he had one, okay, I'll believe you. But he must've took a print and had it made."

"Why would he do that?"

"You tell me."

"Just answer the question . . ."

The voices faded as Benny focused on Windmill Curtis looming up at him, approaching the bar, waving his arms around as usual. He was a balding, ungainly man of about seventy, with a lot of jerky movements like he wasn't wired right. Leathery hide on him. A fitter at the shipyard back in the good old days, when he wasn't building fake antique furniture.

"That the cops in there, Benny?" He flung out an arm.

"What do you need, Windy? Another dark Bacardi's? Go sit down, I'll bring it to you in a minute."

"We all heard what happened. Four-Foot gettin' bunged. Tried to stop a break-in is the way I figure it. Kinda thing he'd do. Yeah, I need a rum. Coke onna side."

"If you want to go sit down, I'll bring it to you."

"Too bad about Four-Foot. Nice little fella. Loaned him some tools one time."

"Yeah, too bad."

"They can't think Beemer killed him."

"They can think anything they want. Go sit down."

"That one cop in there, that Steinbesser, he was after me once, years ago. Same sorta situation. Must be, lemme see now, ten, fifteen years since I didn't kill that guy." He threw his left arm into motion suddenly, almost sweeping Benny's Scotch-rocks off the bar. "Guy used to sit right over there."

Benny scooped ice, splashed out a double rum, and shoved it at Windmill with a side of coke. He wasn't interested in Windy's war story. He was missing everything being said back there behind the doors of the cooler.

Windmill scooped up the two glasses, one in each of his big, arthritic hands.

"Noop. Whatever happened, the Beem needs to settle it. This here is awful bad for business. I mean, I seen as high as a hunnerd guys in here this time of the day, drinkin' like tool pushers." The hand holding the glass with the rum leaped, making a sudden, erratic arc. "An' now look. Might as well be a tea shop. Guys don't like to see all these cops around. He needs to settle it."

"He's working on that. You go sit down now, Windy."

Reluctantly, Windmill finally shoved off and ambled away to his table. Benny shook his head, said, "Jeez," and leaned his head back against the wall.

"... we will, we will," Steinbesser was saying, "only the way things stand, it's looking bad for you."

"Like I would knock off my own employee, then phone you guys to come and investigate. Why wouldn't I drop the body in the harbor? I could practically carry him there under my arm."

"All I'm saying, you haven't exactly been a Boy Scout all your life. So if you know anything, you hear something, you give me a call right away. Number's on this card. We want to help you, but what can we do, you know?"

The men tramped out of the back room, cops in the lead, Beemer bringing up the rear with a heavy frown and pulling the door shut as he came through after them.

Halfway along the bar, the procession stopped. Steinbesser suddenly remembering something.

"Where's this bat I been hearing about?"

Beemer muttered something, stepped past Benny, and pulled his pacifier out from under the bar. A baseball bat that looked like it had been used to hammer in rivets and pound grapes.

"I heard about this," Steinbesser said, taking it in his hands and hefting it, a little smile playing on his lips. "The Al Capone bat, right? This is the actual one?"

Beemer shrugged. "According to eBay."

Steinbesser stroked the wood, then pulled his hand back suddenly. "Look at the stains on it there."

"Interesting," Will Beech said. But he didn't appear interested. He was studying Beemer. "And you say you don't keep a firearm?"

"Scout's honor."

"Yeah, right," Steinbesser said with a laugh. He handed over the bat, and the two cops turned away.

"When are you guys gonna take that tape off my fridge?" Beemer called after their retreating backs. "I'm tryin' to run a business here—"

"You give me a call right away, you remember anything," Steinbesser said. Then they went out the door.

"How'd it go?" Benny made way for Beemer and got back up on his stool.

"They didn't arrest me, but I think they're hosing down a cell." Beemer straightened the bar rag with a sour look, then slumped against the wall and closed his eyes.

"You told them what Rusty said?" Benny asked him.

"Come on."

"You got to give to get."

"Not to the law, I don't. I learned something anyway. They let it slip. Asked if I ever been out to Four-Foot's place, up the hill there, over on Gottingen."

"And have you?"

"No."

"So what's your point?"

"They never mentioned Robie Street."

Beemer led Benny into his cubbyhole office, pretty much a desk in a walk-in closet, and rifled through a bottom drawer. He pulled out a bedraggled accordion folder, slipped back the elastic cord, and flipped through the files till he found what he wanted. "See, here's the application he filled out, all the usual bs. I got to ask people. It's the law." Beemer studied the dog-eared sheet a minute. "He went through a bit of an act about this."

"What act?"

"He fills in this form, then comes to me later and says he thinks he put the wrong address on it, could we tear it up and do another one."

"How could he put the wrong address?"

"Said he had a senior moment, wrote down the address of some other dump where he used to live."

"So did you do another one?"

"Nah. I wasn't too worried. I figured we'd straighten it out later. Now I guess we won't."

"Let me see that."

Benny took the form out of Beemer's hands, glanced over it, and grunted. "There's no house number here."

"No."

"But it does say Robie Street. And the cops went to Gottingen?"

"Yeah."

"And they found all his stuff there?"

"I guess."

"So his story holds up."

Beemer folded his thick arms. "It would, except that a while after this happened, he left his jacket here one night. A Monday, he was off-shift. One of the customers brought it to me. I didn't recognize it right away, an' I went through the pockets for a name or a phone number. What I found was a week-old receipt made out to a Mr. Argus. One month's rent for a room on Robie Street. So I knew he never did leave that place."

"Argus instead of Angus. Like he changed one letter."

"Right."

Benny pursed his lips. "Okay, so he kept two places. One of them under a false name. Now why would he do that, you think?"

"I was wondering."

Steinbesser didn't start the car right away. He reached for the Tim Horton's double-double he'd bought earlier—double cream, double sugar—found the coffee cold and tossed the cup and contents out the window. From where he was parked they could look down the slope of the hill at the Rob Roy.

"I think that barkeeper was telling the truth," Will Beech said, standing over the driver's window, one hand on the roof of the car.

"Who, the Beem?" Steinbesser snorted. "He couldn't tell the truth if you wrote it out for him."

"I'm not so sure he knows anything about this."

Steinbesser started the car.

"I don't know what he knows. But he's made to order for it."

He put the car in motion and drew away from the curb with a sharp chirp of rubber. Will Beech watched him drive away with a thoughtful look.

Since the phone company wasn't an option, Beemer sent Windmill along to the Tall Ship to see if he couldn't find the Engineer. The Engineer—real name Saniol Jones—was a guy you could turn to with a question about data lines, computers, or any gadget that crossed your mind. He could sketch out a circuit diagram for an optical burglar alarm on a serviette, and he programmed cell phones. He also took bets from fellow ex-pats on unusual sporting events back home in Trinidad. He stopped in

front of the bar, displaying a wide grin and swinging his rasta tails to one side.

"That what he say? Check out you data line?"

"Yeah, an' we did check it," Beemer told him. "Traced it right out through the back wall."

"An' you don't see nothing theh? No little box out theh?"

"What kinda box?"

Sanoool shook his head and went to look for himself. He came back nodding. "This a good one, mistah." Then to Windmill, "Fetch me a light." And to Beemer again, "You got some Carib back theh? I'm dry as dead man."

With a Carib lager to irrigate him, Sanoool got down to work. He practically stood on his head in the cramped cabinet under the till, poking Windmill's little Maglite around, tugging the cable as if he was playing a fish, probing where it led. In the back room he asked for a ladder, and Beemer scowled. "Where am I supposed to get a ladder from?"

"Up to you," Sanoool said grinning, "you want this business fix." He took a swig of beer and fluttered his eyebrows. "If I have leg like a giraffe, I don't need no ladder. But I just a regular man. Got regular leg."

Beemer glowered, stepped over to Windmill, and explained the problem. Windmill obediently slouched out into the street again, and was back few minutes later with his arm through the rungs of a folded stepladder. Bumping and banging it against the door frame. Beemer shouted at him to watch the woodwork.

"Everybody in the Tall Ship" (Sanoool used a hard "e" when he said 'the'), "they hear about Four-Foot getting shot through the hat."

"Through the what?" Beemer said.

"Through the hat." Sanoool thumped his breast with his bunched fist to show where he thought the bullet had gone in. He relieved Windmill of his burden. "It don't surprise me. All you must hear the story 'bout the man. How he backside fired out the door of the Tall Ship ten year ago when he a waiter theh."

"We forget," Benny said. "Remind us."

"Oh yes." Sanoool dragged the ladder into the back room. "Patchy spot him one night after he close the place, Four-Foot goin' through the trash. Takin' things." He opened the ladder, tried it for strength, then swarmed nimbly up the rungs to the ceiling.

"What kinda things?" Beemer growled.

Sanoool grinned down at him. "All you never hear about it?"

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

"Carbon paper," Sanoool said, sounding superior. "Carbon paper,

all them credit cards. Remember the old machine them days, you need to—*swik-swik*—take an imprint? People pay him for that old carbon paper.” Sanool levered one of the ceiling panels aside, climbed up till his head disappeared, and shone the Maglite around. “Hah!” he said, reaching for something and dragging it out. Grinning brightly, he came back down a step, and held out something trapped between two long fingers, a small gray plastic box with a short length of wire dangling from it.

“Understand,” Sanool explained, “all the high tech now, you don’t need to steal carbon paper. This little fellow, hidin’ up in the ceiling theh, it collect all the credit card data you want.”

Beemer was mystified. “How does it work?”

“Somebody here, one of you waiter, got a little scanner. Fit in the pocket. He take the customer card, put it through your machine like he s’posed to. Then—nobody lookin’—put it through his own. Beep! The card data transmit through the air an’ store in this box.” He tugged the wire. “See? Antenna. Every once in a while he got to collect this—” He popped out a little memory chip and flashed it at them. “—an’ slip in a new one. Change the battery, time to time.”

“I’m impressed,” Benny said.

“For each card he make maybe thirty dollah. The man who pay him then make new card, sell each one for three *hundred* dollah. Mebbe same man shoot him through the hat. Want it?”

Sanool held out the box.

Beemer thought a minute. “Nup,” he said. “Just give me the chip. Put the doofus back where it was.” He glanced at Benny. “Three hunnerd a card? Someone’s gonna come lookin’ for that.”

Benny called Windmill over, topped up his Bacardi’s, and sat him at the table where the bar made a jog to the wall.

“You mentioned Four-Foot borrowing something?”

“Tools, yeah.” The old man’s head bobbed. “Spin-saw. Little pry bar. A hammer.”

“Did he say what he wanted them for?”

“Noop. An’ I never asked him. None of my business.”

“Did you deliver them to his place personally?”

“Noop. Brought ’em here. Turned out I had to go an’ collect ’em later, though. After a couple weeks, I seen he forgot about my tools, an’ I had to start in chasin’ him. Finally, like it’s my fault, he tells me I might as well come around an’ get ’em. An’ he gives me an address.”

“Gottingen Street?”

“Noop. Place up there on Robie.”

Benny traded looks with Beemer.

"You didn't write down the number by any chance?"

"You kidding? My age, I got to write down my own number."

Benny smiled as Windmill dug through his pockets.

They left Windmill in charge of the Rob Roy and headed up the hill. "I'll be lucky when we get back," Beemer muttered, "if I got a glass or a bottle left in the place."

At the address on Robie Street they discovered a collapsing Cape Cod with a rusting iron fence around it, and an ugly Lunenberg bump above the door. The super was a sawed-off gnome of a woman who looked like Peter Lorre on a bad hair day. Her bulbous eyes pondered them suspiciously, an orange cat glared from between her ankles, and raucous TV laughter cackled behind the door. An odoriferous pong wafted out at them.

"I don't know about letting you go up there," the woman told them. Her chin drooped into a flabby mound that strained and strove against the wool of her sweater. Benny showed her a twenty. "Mr. Argus said it was all right. He told us to give you this." The landlady narrowed her eyes. She said, "Well, then, I guess it's okay." She took the twenty and stood back out of their way.

In the entryway they had to wade through cats. "Careful of all those little feet," the landlady cautioned them. Their footsteps echoed in the stairwell.

"What I'm starting to think," Benny said, as they climbed the stairs, "is that Four-Foot kept two joints so if someone came snooping around his apartment—his actual home—they wouldn't find what they were looking for."

"And what . . . would that be?" Beemer wheezed. His face was blue. The third and final flight of stairs, narrower and steeper, was a pulse raiser.

"Remember what Sanoool told us? How Four-Foot would get about thirty bucks a card? Well, suppose he made up his mind to do better. Go for the three bills himself. That might be enough to get him shot."

"Through the hat."

"Through the whatever."

At the top of the stairs they found a long narrow room running the length of the house under the eaves. It was lined with dust bunnies and discarded fast-food containers. The walls rose waist high, then sloped in to meet a narrow ceiling with a couple of dangling bulbs to light the place. Four-Foot hadn't gone in much for furniture. There was a mattress on the floor with a rumpled blanket, and a lot of empty bottles arranged in an orderly row along

the wall. One nearly full jug of Glen Breton whisky stood by within easy reaching distance.

"Man knows his Scotch," Benny said.

"Single malt. It's only Scotch if it's from Scotland." Beemer leaned against the doorframe wheezing, a big hand spread out and pressed to his side. "An' it's prob'ly mine anyway," he added.

"How can your customers afford Glen Breton?"

"Guys like you, you mean? You can't. It's my private stash."

The only other furnishings were a new ergonomic office chair, a small desk and a side table. The desk and table had a frayed, spotted dustcloth thrown over them. Benny yanked the cloth away. His face lit up. "Jackpot."

They were looking at a computer. Beside it, set up on the table, was a sophisticated-looking printer, another gadget that was clearly some sort of press, and, spilling from a Wal-Mart bag, a small mound of shiny blank credit cards, all the big names and logos printed on them.

"You were right," Beemer said. "The guy was going for it."

In a drawer they found more cards.

"These could be worth something," Beemer said, holding one up for a closer look. "And the machine too. We could get a good buck for that."

"Not the best idea under the circumstances," Benny advised. "And don't get your prints on anything. Are you forgetting what Steinbesser told you?" He had scrutinized each bare wall, and was now pacing the room, peering at the floor.

"What're you up to?" Beemer asked. He cleaned the card on his shirt, and dropped it.

"Just looking."

Finally, Benny shoved the mattress aside and went down on his knees. He began prying at the floor with his pocketknife. One board came up. Then another. He rolled back on his heels. "How about that?" Between the floor joists, neatly stacked, were bundles of notes cinched with thick, red rubber bands.

"Man," Beemer breathed. "How'd you cotton on to that?"

"What else would Four-Foot want tools for? Not to do repairs for the cat lady, I don't think."

"You got to hand it to him," Beemer said. "He was a digger. Why let Death's Head make all the serious dough when he could rake it in himself, cut out the middleman."

"One reason might be to keep from ending up in a beer fridge with a bullet in him."

"Yeah, well, you got to expect setbacks in business. How much you got there?"

Benny was hauling the bundles out of the cavity, buzzing through the notes with a practiced thumb. There were twenties and fifties, but mostly hundreds. His lips moved. Finally he said, "Looks like, I dunno, maybe thirty-eight, forty big ones."

"Say again?"

"You heard me."

Beemer dumped out the Wal-Mart bag. "Shove it all in here."

"You sure?"

"You can't rob a robber. Fill your boots."

Heading home through a thick fog, they took Cunard Street past the Halifax Common, rolling down toward the harbor and the smoky lights of the Rob Roy. Despite the fog, traffic was heavy. A motorcycle shot by, snarling, and was swallowed up in the mist.

"Four-Foot's pals won't be happy when they get to Robie Street and find the cupboard bare," Benny said.

"They don't have the address."

"They'll bang heads till they get it."

Beemer thought about that.

"You put the boards back in place?"

"I thought you did."

"Jeez," Beemer said through his teeth. The silence lasted a block. Finally he added, "They'll be hot when they see that."

"No kidding. They'll probably think of you."

"Line forms on the right."

There was a lot of TV noise in the house, and Steinbesser had to ring the bell a third time, leaning on it to make sure he was heard. Fog slowly twisted around the houses on either side. Finally, a lady opened the door, almost a midget, some wrinkled old doll who had to tilt her head back practically horizontal to look up at Steinbesser's face. The smell of cats almost knocked him out.

"Police," Steinbesser said, showing his badge.

"Yes?"

"There were two men just here. We need to talk about that."

She was already shaking her head. "They weren't nobody I ever met."

"Mind telling me what they were doing here then?"

"I don't mind. They were friends of one of my tenants. They waited for him, but he didn't come, so they went away. That's all I know about it."

She made as if to close the door. The TV woofing away in there.

He counted three, four, five cats gliding around. Cats gave him the creeping fantods.

"What's your tenant's name?"

"Mr. Argus."

"Where did those visitors wait?"

"In his room upstairs."

"By themselves?"

"Yes."

"You mind if I take a look?"

She hesitated. He could see she wanted to ask him about a warrant but couldn't summon up the nerve. "Not one visitor in all this time, and now this." Talking to the cats. "I just don't know, my dears, I just don't know." She shrugged and finally stood back. "Right up at the top," she said. "Mr. Argus has the attic room all to himself. It has a distant view of the harbor if you put your head out the window and you know where to look."

Beemer found a place for the bulging Wal-Mart bag in the bottom of the Rob Roy's freezer, walled in and roofed over with frozen chicken fingers and bags of curly fries. They thought about the doofus, and Benny offered the opinion that, whatever happened, they ought to take good care of it. They might need it for Beemer's defense. "Like you said, Four-Foot's buddies are gonna want that thing. And they must have his key to the Rob Roy if the cops didn't find it on him."

"Another surprise. How'd you know about that?"

"I listened through the wall."

"Nothing is sacred," Beemer said. He pursed his lips, gloom suddenly descending, "You ask me, it only makes things worse. Now I got an obvious reason for knocking off the guy. At this rate, we'll find the murder weapon, and my fingerprints will be all over it. I'll need a miracle."

He relieved Windmill, who went reluctantly back to his table. "Nothing broken here," Beemer said, after a quick inspection. "See," Benny told him, "miracles do happen." Beemer stepped along to take a customer's order, returned and poured out a double Canadian Club, water on the side, and took it to the guy. Then he came back, served Benny a Scotch-rocks, and swept a few loose shards of melting ice into the sink.

"You never asked me what I wanted," Benny said. "I wouldn't of minded trying some of that Glen Breton. Your private stash."

"I told you, you couldn't afford it." Beemer puffed out his cheeks. He let out a big sigh. "Well, the body's gone. Cops are gone. Everything here is cool. They'll come for the doofus tonight."

"And the cash. They'll want that. They'll ask the landlady to draw them a picture of who was up there in that room."

"I guess we should've killed her."

"There you go again. Didn't I tell you not to talk like that?"

"The whole thing's a mess," Beemer said.

"Oh, I don't know. There's a certain kind of order to it." Benny tipped his Scotch-rocks at a slight angle, making little wet blobs on the bar with it. "Four-Foot was running a charge card scam here, but he got into trouble. Scamming his own partners. Suddenly he gets religion. Decides to warn you about what's going on. It won't do him no good, but it'll screw up the other guys. They drag him back here, try to make him cough up the doofus. The cash, too, maybe. But things don't work out." Benny swirled his drink. "It hangs together. You could take everything we got so far, call the number on that card, and make a gift of it to Steinbesser. Don't mention the cash, of course. I know it don't exactly clear you, but it'll look good, the fact you did it, and the court might go easier on you."

"That makes me feel better."

"It's more than what you had going for you before."

"I had nothing going for me before."

"You need to start thinking positive."

"I'm positive I'm goin' to jail unless I get an arm around this thing."

Some guy, rough with his pool cue, sent a ball flying off the table and rolling across the floor. "You rip that felt," Beemer bellowed at him, "I'll come over there an' rip your arms off!"

"You're edgy," Benny said.

"It's all this stuff goin' on."

"So what are you gonna to do about it?"

Beemer pondered that. "Camp out here the night. See what happens. I done it before—crashed here, I mean. Those long booth seats at the back aren't half bad if you don't roll around a lot. About the same width as a cot in the slammer. Good practice for me, where I'm going."

"And if Death's Head shows up? And the furry guy?"

"They better show up. That's the whole idea."

Benny sniffed. He rolled his ice round. "I got a hunch we might be prying you out of your beer cooler in the morning."

"Not a chance. I wouldn't fit."

"You would if they broke enough bones."

"Now who's not thinking positive?"

Eyeing the back booths with misgiving, Benny said, "It's against my better judgment, but how about this. How about if

I bunk down here with you tonight?"

They got everybody out of the place a few minutes early. While Beemer swept up, Benny went to make the night drop. Glancing over his shoulder every two minutes. Expecting something. He didn't know what exactly. When he got back to the Rob Roy, he took a good long look up and down the street. Nothing out of order. Swirling fog. Smudges of color where the shop signs were. A ghostly cab rolling past a block down with a customer inside and the roof light still lit—everybody on the take. He banged at the door until Beemer let him in.

"I don't see your car out there," Benny said.

"I moved it up the hill, make it look like I went home. I'll be lucky if it's not in a chop shop by the time morning rolls around."

Stretched out in a booth under an ancient khaki wool army blanket Beemer had dragged down off a shelf, Benny said, "Man, this thing stinks. Camphor, or something. Mothballs."

"Pardon me for not fluffing your pillow."

"You really believe those guys are gonna show?"

"I think we're gonna find that out," Beemer said. In a matter of seconds he was snoring loud enough to rattle the wineglasses behind the bar. The noise kept Benny awake a long time. When sleep finally arrived, it came in hazy patches, interrupted each time Beemer let out an especially loud, explosive snort.

Eventually he stayed under. He didn't know how long. When he came awake again, he knew something wasn't right. A flicker of light on the ceiling. Shadows bunched against the front window like somebody out there trying to see in. When a key scraped at the lock, he hissed at Beemer, rolled off the seat, and crouched under the table.

The front door popped open, letting the orange glow of the fogged-in streetlights spill through. From where he crouched, Benny saw one, two, three guys move inside, their shadows falling along the length of the bar. The last one in eased the door shut with his butt, and a flashlight winked on.

"Back room," said a heavy voice.

They came along the bar, single file, the old floorboards creaking under them. Turned at the end and shuffled into the storage room.

Benny crawled out on his hands and knees and peered into the next booth. No Beemer. Only his blanket there, a rumpled heap on the floor.

"Jeez," Benny said.

Beemer's plan had a glaring deficiency, which he was just now beginning to realize. The deficiency was that there was no plan.

Like what they were actually going to do if Four-Foot's pals really did show up. They weren't gentle guys. Four-Foot had found that out. And they were most likely packing. Benny, silent in his stocking feet, moved out between the tables and slipped behind the bar. He groped for the Al Capone bat, but found empty air. Nothing seemed to be making sense.

He needed to know what the loogans were up to, and he eased the pass-through slider open a crack. There was some light back there. They had switched on the desk lamp in Beemer's cramped little office. He made out Death's Head and Bongo, no mistaking those two. The third man had his back to the slider. They were all staring at the ceiling.

"How we gonna get up there?" Bongo was saying. His bulk loomed large in the back-lit room. "Maybe we shoulda brought a ladder."

"Right. That would've looked great," Death's Head said, "carrying it down Agricola Street, dead of the night. We'd of blended right in with all those other guys carrying ladders."

"Well . . ."

"Use some brain power, if you got any. Prop open that door." He pronounced it *doah*. "Drag one of those tables in here from the other room. Put a chair on it or something."

Benny squeezed down under the till as the big man came past the bar. The guy grabbed the nearest table, one of the square ones, and muscled it back into the storage room. He returned for a bar stool and dragged that in too.

"Right," Death's Head told him. "See the thumbprints on the ceiling there? Somebody's moved that panel, wouldn't you say?"

The table was rocked into position, the stool hoisted up and placed on top of it. A second chair served as a step.

"Well," Death's Head said. "Get up there."

Bongo studied the teetering structure.

"Not me."

The third man didn't volunteer either, a guy who appeared to be almost as hefty. Death's Head said, "I guess I got to do all the hard jobs around here!" and holding the back of the chair to steady himself, stepped up onto it. From there he clambered onto the table, then slowly and carefully mounted the stool. Crouching there, his feet pressed together, he pushed the panel aside, and reached down for the flashlight. He beamed the light around inside the cavity, then dragged the doofus out.

"Like I thought," he said, dangling it over the heads of the other two like it was a rat, punching its thin tail of wire. "That runt was running his own machine. I knew he was up to something. I'd like to shoot him all over again." He tossed it to the

third man. "Now I want that cash."

"You think there is any cash?" Bongo said. He had a dull, languid voice.

"Got to be. I already told you. What else would he have kept in that secret hidey-hole cut into the floor at that house?"

"Maybe the cards?"

"I don't think so. The cards were right there on the table, more of 'em in the desk drawer. And the press wouldn't fit down there. It had to be cash, and that goddamn barkeeper took it. We're gonna search this dump. Tear it apart. He'll think Hurricane Juan paid him a second visit when he comes in here tomorrow morning. Start with the freezer. People hide things in freezers."

Beemer came out of the shadows with his Al Capone bat swinging. He landed one on Bongo's skull with a sound like an ax-handle rapping a coconut. Bongo said "Ungh!" and folded. Death's Head lost his balance and fell off the table, the wind whooshing out of him when he hit the floor. Somehow he managed to drag a gun out. He loosed one off into a stack of Heineken, with a bang and a muffled, hissing, shattering sound, then he got the barrel trained on Beemer. Beemer froze. Benny, moving up behind by then, laid a six-pack heavily across the guy. Death's Head fell back again, beer suds sputtering and foaming down his face and shirt, the gun still tight in his hand. Benny had to kick three times before the piece finally flew into the corner.

"You had to pick the Löwenbräu?" Beemer asked. "What is it lately with the imported stuff?"

"Don't thank me or anything," Benny replied.

"I wasn't going to." Beemer was gripping the bat like he was ready to knock one out of the park. "Where'd that other bum get to?"

The steel-clad rear exit door stood open a foot. As they studied it, it suddenly swung wide, and Will Beech eased himself into the room.

"Don't worry about him," he said in his usual unruffled voice. "He's cuffed and in the back of my car. We've been watching him for a while. Is everybody all right in here?"

"Steinbesser," Beemer said for at least the eighth time. "Who would've thought?"

"Why not?" Benny said. "If Four-Foot could get into the big money, why not Steinbesser?"

"This is why we get cynical in our old age," Beemer said.

"Because he's the law?"

"Well, who do you trust?"

"When I looked in the booth," Benny said, "and you weren't there, I figured I was gonna have to take on all three of them by myself."

"I woke up worrying about my car," Beemer explained, "decided to go out and move it under a lamppost or something. Took my bat with me in case of trouble. Coming back, taking a shortcut through the alley, I seen a light on in my office an' I knew somethin's goin' on in there. I opened the back door so quiet the old landlady's cats wouldn't even of heard me. Beech must've been right behind me."

"They're saying now what we figured before. Four-Foot must've tried to hide in the cooler. They popped him there and his knees broke when the big guy forced the door shut on him. They matched the bullet to the piece Death's Head was carrying. Still had the murder weapon. How dumb is that?"

"Dumb like a fox. He figured the card thing out."

Beemer pushed away from the wall, picked up the cloth, and swept a faded ring mark off the bar. He rinsed the cloth, wrung it out, and hung it over the edge of the sink.

"Maybe we've lived too long."

"How do you figure?" Benny swirled his Scotch-rocks around

"The way things are today. Use any strong-arm stuff, you're some kinda dinosaur. These high-tech scams are miles ahead. Guys in India, in Nigeria—in Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan, for cryin' out loud—they take millions without raisin' a sweat. The banks make good on it, an' it's like their safes got blown open and robbed."

"There's a different ethic these days."

"That's what I'm telling you," Beemer said.

"People don't want to work for their money now."

"That's what I'm saying."

"What are you gonna do with your half of Four-Foot's stash?"

"After I pay that tax bill? Find another car, I guess. I'm gettin' push-back from the insurance. They say it wasn't exactly car theft because the car was still there, what was left of it. The thief-weasels were there strippin' it the whole time Beech was takin' down our statements. Wheels an' everything gone."

"You can't even park on the street anymore."

"No, you can't. I got Big Jimmy Little to shove it along the ground with his truck, so I could show it actually had moved, but the adjusters weren't impressed." Beemer snorted. "Buncha crooks, those guys."

"Tell me about it."

"Law and order. Too much law and not enough order."

"Tell me about it," Benny said. 🐾

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hill Street Studios/Blend. © Images.com

Rooftop Rooster

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "July/August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the January/February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 235.

PANDORA'S DEMON

GILBERT M. STACK

“How dare you!”

Corey Callaghan's head snapped up and about at the sound of Miss Pandora Parson's voice and the stinging crack of flesh on flesh that accompanied it. His eyes darted about the smoky saloon, past the card table with the empty seat where she had been playing, until he found her ten feet away struggling in the arms of a grinning cowhand. Corey was on his feet and moving even before he fully realized what was happening.

Out of the corner of his eye, Corey could see Patrick O'Sullivan rising in protest as well, but most of the patrons of The Painted Lady were simply watching what was happening. One nearby table of cowhands was even raucously encouraging the attack on Miss Parson.

“I said *let go!*” Miss Parson insisted. Her voice was firm as steel, her manner admitted no fear.

“I know you want to give me a kiss,” the cowhand said, dropping his face down toward hers.

Corey grabbed the man with his left hand, spun him about, and drove a right cross solidly into the man's grinning mouth. Corey knew exactly what he was doing. He was a bare-knuckle boxer by profession with years of experience, and he directed the blow with all his skill and powered it with all the rage and hatred this man had just ignited within him.

It was the single most satisfying punch of Corey's career. The cowhand flew back over the bar and did not rise again.

The raucous cowhands at the nearby table surged to their feet. Corey didn't hesitate. Maybe they planned to talk and not fight, but with the odds three to one against him, Corey couldn't wait to find out. He fully understood that his only advantages were training and speed. He stepped in close and drove another hard right straight out from the shoulder, knocking the first of the newcomers back off his feet.

It was a less spectacular punch than the blow which had sent the man over the bar, but its effect was even more dramatic. The man

staggered back to collapse across another table, spilling drinks and creating havoc. Those men leapt to their feet as well, instantly angry and ready for payback. They didn't seem to blame Corey though. The biggest member of the newly offended party hauled Corey's second victim off the table and sent him sprawling into a small group of miners. They responded in kind, and the chaos spread.

Corey had already flipped the table out of the way and moved in on the next man. Two jabs and a body blow doubled him over, giving Corey the opportunity to move on down the line, striking mercilessly in an increasingly vain effort to end the battle.

Normally Corey enjoyed a good fight, but with Miss Parson in the saloon and the focus of the wrong sorts of attention, he was worried about losing track of the redhead in the growing madness.

Patrick was getting into the action as well. The old man had always had less sense than Corey and the boxing trainer loved an opportunity to show that he still had what it took when the need arose. He was wiry and fit, but old, and Corey couldn't watch his back and Miss Parson.

As yet another man took a swing at Corey, he was forced to acknowledge that he might even have trouble looking after himself if he stayed much longer. He easily ducked the punch and turned his new opponent's excited grin into a startled O with a couple of blows to the stomach.

Corey backed up, ready to punch again, but the man was turning his attention to easier playmates and Corey decided to let him go.

He stopped next to Miss Parson, looking out for anyone moving purposefully in their direction. For a brief moment the space around them resembled a lull in the storm. None of the friends of Miss Parson's original antagonist were showing any further interest in them. And as for the man who really started the trouble, a quick glance showed Corey that he was literally lying unconscious behind the bar.

"Shall we fight our way through to Patrick?" Corey shouted. "Or do you just want me to get you out of here?"

Through the flickers of expression which danced across Miss Parson's face, Corey could almost see her taking even firmer hold of herself. She was that sort of woman: strong and courageous; grit as well as beauty and brains.

"We'd best not leave Mr. O'Sullivan behind us," she shouted back.

Corey nodded with approval. It was never good to leave a friend alone in a brawl, although Corey would have done it if Miss Parson had needed him to.

"Stay close behind me!" he shouted, then began to clear a path to Patrick O'Sullivan.

Outside The Painted Lady, Patrick was fuming. "Men like that!" he spat. "They've no respect for anyone! Miss Parson, I am so ashamed that I could not get there to help you. Not that Corey needed me!" he added quickly, pride in Corey's fists bursting through his outrage. "That first blow, me lad, was a thing of beauty. Legends come out of punches like that when you land them in the ring."

The old man suddenly remembered what he had been saying. "But that man in there, laying his hands on a good and honorable woman."

"It happens sometimes," Miss Parson quietly acknowledged. "It's a vile and repulsive thing, but a risk that women run when they enter my profession. Thankfully it happens far less frequently now that I'm traveling with you and Mr. Callaghan."

A man was slowly approaching them. The tin star on his vest reflected the light from the saloon where the brawl was still raging. The marshal stopped in their general vicinity, watching the fight through a window. He spat tobacco juice to the ground. "Looks like it's already winding down," he announced.

He turned to face the three friends, hitching his thumbs in his gun belt. "You the boxer who threw the first punch?"

"Aye," Corey acknowledged, trying to size up the man. He was big and solid, but his stance struck Corey as being more neutral than hostile.

Patrick evidently didn't read him that way. "He was defending the honor of this young woman!"

The marshal spat again. "Ain't no honorable women in Perdition," he said, then tipped his hat. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am."

"Why that's—"

The marshal interrupted him. "Ain't none of us got much honor or reputation here. Why do you think we call it *Perdition*?"

"I did wonder about that," Miss Parson said.

"You're the lady gambler?"

"Yes."

"Well you're probably the only woman in town who either ain't a whore or hasn't been one." He winked. "Best keep watching out for yourself. A lot of men here would like to change that."

"I see," Miss Parson said, giving no indication at all that the news surprised or troubled her.

"In fact, that's sort of why I'm here," the marshal said.

Corey clenched his fist, but if the marshal noticed, he gave no indication.

"I've got just enough gentlemanly instincts left that I'd like to keep something like that from happening to a pretty little woman like you. So I came by to warn you that you'd all best get out of town. I don't care none about the fight, but the way I hear it, the first man you punched was Jack Russel."

The marshal paused for their reactions but neither Corey, nor apparently Patrick or Miss Parson, had heard the name.

"Jack Russel?" he said again. "The Russel Gang? Cattle-rustling, stagecoach-robbing, dry-gulching murderers?"

Corey relaxed his fist and spread his hands. "Sorry, Marshal, we're new to these parts."

"Well you both just met him ten or fifteen minutes ago and let's just say he's not known for his forgiving moods."

"Thanks for the warning," Corey said.

"If you know he's done all these things," Patrick asked, "why don't you arrest him?"

The marshal laughed. "If I started arresting people around here for breaking the law, I'd have to lock up plumb near the whole town. I'm just interested in keeping the peace here in Perdition. I don't care what they do anywhere else."

As the marshal finished speaking, a man was thrown sprawling through the batwing doors of The Painted Lady. The officer of the law didn't appear to notice.

"It's very kind of you," Miss Parson said, "to take the trouble to walk over here and warn us about this problem."

"No trouble at all, ma'am."

"Would you happen to know when the next stagecoach drives through town?"

"It's due about ten o'clock Thursday morning," the marshal said, "although it's been known to arrive both early and late."

Two days, Corey thought, or really two nights and a day.

"Thank you very sincerely," Miss Parson said, rewarding the marshal with her most charming smile. "It's gentlemen like you who make the West a safer place for women. We'll be sure to take your advice."

"He didn't . . ." Patrick sputtered. "He won't . . ."

The marshal touched his hat again. "I'm always happy to assist a pretty lady. If you'd like to come down and stay with me for the next couple of nights, I'm sure I can keep you safe."

"Very generous," Miss Parson assured him, "but as Mr. Russel learned this evening, Mr. Callaghan and Mr. O'Sullivan are

quite capable of keeping me safe."

"Well the offer stands if you change your mind," the marshal said, then hitched his thumbs in his gun belt again and moved off the way he had come.

"Can you believe the utter gall of that man?" Corey asked as he, Patrick, and Miss Parson walked through the dark streets back to their boarding house.

"Actually," Miss Parson corrected him, "the marshal appears quite a decent man for this sort of town—especially decent for a man in authority."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, he could have arrested me for inciting that brawl and then tried to force himself on me. In the best of places the West is very dangerous for a woman on her own—especially a woman with an unorthodox profession such as me."

Corey started to protest but forced himself to shut up. He had to assume that Miss Parson knew what she was talking about.

"Normally," she continued, "I would not have stopped in a town with a name like Perdition. But Mr. O'Sullivan was certain he could get you a good fight here, and I do enjoy traveling with the both of you."

"Me?" Patrick said. "I'm responsible for this?"

"Of course not, Mr. O'Sullivan, Jack Russel is responsible."

"But why didn't you say something?" Patrick asked. "There are other towns that Corey could fight in."

"I knew the risks," Miss Parson explained, "and I decided to gamble that Mr. Callaghan's impressive physique and growing reputation would be sufficient to deter aggressive . . . admiration." She shrugged. "Sometimes you play the odds and lose."

Corey thought about that and about what Miss Parson's life must have been like before she had begun to travel with Corey and Patrick. He had often wondered why a woman with her dignity, intelligence, and beauty chose to stay with a small-time boxer and his trainer. Now he understood her reasons a tiny bit better.

"We're all agreed then?" Corey asked. "We won't schedule a fight in Perdition. We'll just catch the next stage instead—wherever it's going."

Patrick and Miss Parson agreed.

"Good, then we'll all walk up to the stage station after my run tomorrow morning to buy tickets. Until we get out of town, Miss Parson, I think it best if you don't go outside without both Patrick and me beside you. I also think we should stay out of the saloons tomorrow night."



Corey was trying to cool off after a four-mile run when the man approached him a couple of buildings shy of the boarding house. "Say, aren't you Rock Quarry Callaghan?"

Corey stopped, eyeing the man carefully after last night's fight. He didn't recognize him, and he saw no sign of bruises or other injury. He was armed but his hands were out in front of him, nowhere near his pistol. There also didn't appear to be anyone with him.

"Aye," Corey acknowledged, "that's me."

"Sam Taylor," the man introduced himself, offering Corey his hand.

Corey tentatively accepted it. The grip was firm and friendly.

"What a punch you threw last night," Taylor said. "I think you punched Jack Russel clear into next week. I've never seen anything like it."

Corey couldn't contain the pride that stirred his voice. "It was a fine blow, wasn't it?"

"The very best," Taylor said, placing his hand on Corey's shoulder and gently encouraging him to turn back toward the heart of town. "Why don't you come have a drink with me? I'd love to hear more about your career."

"It's too early to drink," Corey objected. "Besides, I haven't had breakfast yet."

"Then have breakfast with me," Taylor suggested.

A muffled "No!" sounded from farther down the street. Corey's head whipped around, certain that it had been Miss Parson's voice shouting. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sam Taylor reaching for his gun.

Corey's boxer's hands were faster than any quick-draw artist's. His fingers reached out as the gun cleared leather and taught Sam Taylor the danger of standing too close to your intended victim when you start your draw. He grabbed the pistol barrel and pulled the gun out of Taylor's hands before he could bring it to bear or finish settling his finger on the trigger. With a flick of his wrist Corey tossed the gun down the street, then settled to the business of quickly showing Taylor what he had wanted to know about Corey's fists.

Four seconds later, Taylor was lying dazed and bloody in the street. Corey ran to the boarding house, scooping up the pistol on the way so he could pop the cylinder and empty out the bullets. As he mounted the steps to the porch, he hurled the weapon farther up the street. Then he was through the front door and into the hall.

Mrs. Kettle, the owner of the boarding house, was standing by the stairwell looking up toward the landing. If she was happy to see Corey, she had a funny way of showing it. "Russel," she shouted in her gravelly voice, "Callaghan's coming!"

Corey was past her and half up the stairs before one of the members of Jack Russel's gang appeared to face him. Corey recognized this one. He was the third man Corey had hit last night and his bruised face blanched with fear when he saw Corey charging up at him. His pistol whipped up, but Corey was already there. This time there was a shot before Corey's fist was reintroducing itself to the man's face.

It happened quickly. The man stumbled backward, dropping his gun, and Corey grabbed him by the shirt, pivoted, and hurled him through the air and down the stairs.

The door to Miss Parson's room was open and she was struggling with a man on her bed. His fist raised to strike her and Corey grabbed hold of it, wrenching hard until the bones snapped.

Jack Russel screamed, but Corey wasn't finished with him. He threw the outlaw up against the wall and began to brutally punish him with his fists.

Something crashed hard to the floor in the next room, reminding Corey that Patrick was somewhere up here as well. He yanked Jack Russel away from the wall and tossed him down the stairwell after his partner.

The door to Patrick's room opened, revealing the old man standing in his long johns, breathing hard. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek from his temple. "Miss Parson?" he asked.

"I'm right here," she said, coming to the door of her room. Unlike Patrick, she was fully dressed. "I'm right here and I'm all right, thanks to the both of you."

"Maybe this will end it this time," Corey said. "I'm pretty sure I heard Russel's wrist snap."

He stepped past Patrick to check on the outlaw the old man had been struggling with. The man lay sprawled unconscious on the floor.

"They pistol-whipped me when they burst in here," Patrick explained. "But when you arrived and distracted him, I was able to get back up and finish things."

Corey smiled at the pride in Patrick's voice. It was so like what he was feeling himself.

Mrs. Kettle looked up from the pile of men groaning at the bottom of the stairs to glower at Miss Parson. "You're no better than us!" she shouted.

"Yes, I am!" Miss Parson insisted. Her quiet voice yielded no ground to the older woman. "And so are my friends."

"I want you out of here!" Mrs. Kettle screamed.

"No," Miss Parson told her. "We'll be staying until tomorrow morning."

The stagecoach left Perdition twenty minutes after ten o'clock the next morning with Corey, Patrick, and Miss Parson squeezed inside with three other passengers. All had the look of businessmen, which upon reflection, Corey decided they probably were. After all, outlaws needed men to sell their stolen wares and despite the marshal's statements of two nights before, it seemed likely that at least some of the inhabitants of Perdition were semi-legitimate citizens.

Despite the beating he and Patrick had given the Russel gang yesterday morning, Corey had halfway expected the outlaw and his men to confront them again. If Jack Russel had dropped matters after Corey surprised him in the saloon, he could have laughed things off. But after yesterday morning he would need to keep face with his men. Tuesday night Corey had suckered him. Wednesday morning he and Patrick had beaten the Russel gang. Pride would make him want to restore his reputation, but evidently the broken arm and the beatings were too much for him because no one tried to prevent the three friends from getting on the coach.

Wyoming Territory was cool in November but beautiful to behold, with great rocky hills and scraggly trees. The sky was clear and blue and the sun shone happily as the stagecoach rolled to a stop some forty-five minutes out of town.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Callaghan," the driver said, "but this is as far as you and your friends go."

"What are you talking about?" Patrick asked. "We paid for passage to River Rock."

But Corey already understood. Apparently everyone aboard had known what was going to happen. None of the three businessmen would meet his eyes.

"Will you take Miss Parson on out of here?" Corey asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Callaghan, I have my orders," the driver said.

Corey looked to the businessmen. "Are you just going to sit there? A woman's in danger."

The three men squirmed. One of them finally muttered: "It's the Russel Gang, doggone it!"

"It's all right, Mr. Callaghan," Miss Parson said. She showed no fear at all. "I'd much rather walk with two men like you and Mr.

O'Sullivan than ride with these cowards."

She reached past Corey and opened the door. "Driver, get our bags off the top of the coach and I expect you to refund our fares."

"Russel didn't say anything about—"

"Do it!"

The driver swallowed and began to retrieve their bags.

Corey stepped out of the coach and helped Miss Parson to the ground. She held her head high. Nothing in her demeanor suggested this was any place but where she wanted to be.

Patrick got out of the coach as the driver dropped his and Corey's duffles down beside them. He thought better about dropping Miss Parson's carpetbag and handed it to Patrick.

"And our fares!" Miss Parson insisted, as he began to settle back in his seat.

"But I don't have them on me!" the driver whined. "Your fares are back in the station."

"Then pay me yourself," Miss Parson ordered. "I may be murdered out here, but I'll be *damned* before I let myself be robbed by a two-bit coward of a thief!"

The driver stared at her for a moment, then shifted his gaze to Corey. It was clear that he had heard what had happened at the boarding house. He began to search his pockets. "I don't know how much I have on me."

"Will this do?" one of the businessmen asked, flipping a golden double eagle out of the window at them. It was worth far more than they had paid for their ride.

"Driver, get us out of here!" the businessman ordered.

The stagecoach driver picked up his reins and the coach lurched on its way.

Corey, Patrick, and Miss Parson stood for a moment staring at each other as the dust from the coach drifted past them. Finally, Corey reached down and picked up his duffel and Miss Parson's bag. "No reason to make this easy for them," he said. "Let's hit the trail."

The hoots and howls of approaching riders distracted Corey's friends from answering his suggestion.

The Russel Gang was riding toward them.

Corey put down the bag and turned to face the newcomers. Neither he, Patrick, nor Miss Parson carried a gun, so they were at a distinct disadvantage in any hostile encounter with the gang. Four of the five men held pistols or rifles. All sported bruises from the two earlier fights.

Jack Russel had his arm in a sling and his free hand gripped the

reins of his horse. He led his men in a galloping circle around the travelers that ended with him facing Corey and his men spread out to fence Patrick and Miss Parson in.

"Isn't this nice," Russel slurred, clearly having trouble speaking with his bruised jaw. "'Magine meeting you out here."

"Shoot us if you want to," Patrick said, "but don't make us listen to you speak through that mouth."

"Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson said. "This probably isn't the best time to further anger them."

"Who's trying to anger anyone?" Patrick asked. "That jaw is so swollen it hurts my ears just to listen to him rasp."

"I'll make you hurt!" Russel growled, dropping his reins to draw his pistol. It was clearly awkward for him to get it out of the off-side holster and firmly into his hand.

"That's why I told you to shoot us," Patrick said again. "It's the only way you'll be able to hurt us. After all, my Corey has already beaten the lot of you once and some of you twice. Hell, even an old man like me beat one of you, so it's not like we're scared of another man-to-man fight."

Jack Russel's purple face was growing even darker. "Tom," he grunted. "Kill him if he speaks again."

The outlaw to Russel's left dismounted and stepped forward, covering the three with his rifle.

"Miss Parson," Russel said. "I'll say this once. You come with me and be my whore and I'll spare the lives of your friends."

"All right," Miss Parson said without hesitation, startling every man present with her answer.

She stepped forward toward Russel, but Corey grabbed her wrist. "I'm sorry, Miss Parson, but I can't let you do this—not even if I thought they would keep their word."

Miss Parson looked into Corey's eyes for a moment, then slapped his face before jerking back away from him, trying to slip from his grasp. The slap caught Corey by surprise and she succeeded in pulling him several steps closer to Tom.

"Please, Mr. Callaghan," she said. "There's no need for all of us to die."

Tom's bruised face broke into a wide grin. "That's right, Callaghan, don't try and stop the lady from being a woman."

Corey did not let go and Tom waved to the other gang members. "Come on, boys, let's give her a hand. Maybe Jack will share."

All around the circle, men dismounted their horses and hurried to help Miss Parson pull free of Corey. Only Russel, himself, remained in the saddle.

As the first man laid hold of him, Corey released his grip on Miss

Parson, allowing her to throw herself into the path of Sam Taylor. Corey's left hand shot out and grabbed the barrel of Tom's rifle, pulling it easily out of the startled man's grip. Pivoting about and swinging the rifle like an axe, he brought the stock down on the shoulder of the final man, while Patrick darted in to punch the man touching Corey.

Miss Parson grappled and clawed at Sam Taylor, trying to drag him down to the ground.

Corey lunged for Tom, hoping that Russel was too poor of a left-handed shot to risk shooting into the brawl. Tom had recovered from his momentary surprise and met Corey's chin with a surprisingly strong right cross. It was completely unexpected. Corey had had such an easy time with these men on the previous two occasions that he had discarded the possibility that any of them really knew how to fight. But each of those times he had taken them by surprise. On this occasion, they were much more ready for him.

Tom took advantage of the success of his first blow to land a second from the left. Then he stepped back and tried to draw his pistol.

Corey was on him before the gun could clear leather, punching in combination with his right and left fists, showing Tom how he had beaten Sam Taylor.

Corey left Tom laid out on his back and turned to help Miss Parson and Patrick. A gunshot cracked the air but as no one seemed to be hit, Corey ignored it. He raced past Patrick, who seemed to be holding his own and ran to help Miss Parson against Taylor.

The outlaw saw what was coming just before Corey reached him. He left off struggling with Miss Parson and too late reached for his gun. With Miss Parson still hanging on to his right arm, Taylor could neither draw his weapon nor defend himself. Corey punched him hard in the neck—just below the chin—and hoped that he had killed the man. A final desperate twist out of the way on Taylor's part probably meant that he didn't.

A second shot cut the air and Corey felt a stinging sensation burn across his cheek. He whirled about to find Jack Russel bearing down on him, no longer mounted, pistol straight out in front of him, left-hand thumb pulling back the hammer to fire again.

He wasn't close enough for Corey to grab or bat the weapon. And he wasn't far enough away to miss.

Corey stood frozen as the outlaw's finger tightened on the trigger, trying to guess which way he should leap.

A third gunshot split the Wyoming air.

Russel's eyes widened. His arm in the sling pawed at the patch of red spreading across his chest. Then the pistol fell from his hand and he dropped dead.

Miss Parson coolly stuck her derringer back into the little pocket in her dress.

"That was quite a strategy," Corey complimented Miss Parson. "I was completely taken in. I really thought you were going off with him."

They were sitting on the trail some three miles farther out of Perdition, having helped themselves to many of the outlaws supplies but deciding that none of them were skilled enough to ride the gang's horses. Besides, stealing horses was usually a hanging offense, and Corey had no doubt that Russel and his men had stolen those animals from somebody.

"It wasn't a strategy," Miss Parson told him. "While I thought the odds were slim that they would let you and Mr. O'Sullivan live, I deemed the chances better than if I stayed and made you fight for me." It was by far the longest speech she had made since killing Jack Russel.

Corey tried for a moment to imagine life knowing he had left Miss Parson to the likes of Jack Russel. He shook his head. It was just too terrible. He couldn't imagine it. "Well, it worked anyway," he said, "and I'm awfully glad it did."

"You could have both been killed," Miss Parson whispered, clearly as haunted by the thought as Corey was of leaving her with Russel.

"Well, you saved us," Corey said, "or maybe we all saved each other."

They sat in silence for a while, watching a hawk glide on the wind.

"Wait a minute," Patrick said. "Why didn't you tell us you carry a derringer?"

Miss Parson shrugged. "Holdout weapons are much more effective if no one knows about them."

"But all the trouble we've been in and you've never drawn it."

"Are you certain?" Miss Parson asked, almost allowing her lips to smile. "What you really mean is: 'All the trouble we've been in and I've never fired it.'"

Patrick thought about that for a minute. "I guess that's so."

Corey got to his feet and picked up his duffel and Miss Parson's bag. "We've got a long walk ahead of us, I suggest we get going."

Patrick and Miss Parson rose as well.

"A little holdout gun," Patrick muttered. "Who would have guessed?"

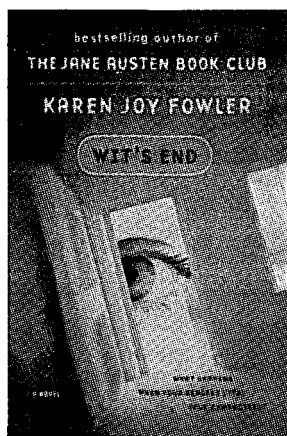
"The West can be very dangerous for a woman on her own," Miss Parson said. "I haven't always been fortunate enough to travel with two good friends." 🦋

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Foul play is never more interesting than when the mystery author gets a dose of his or her own medicine, as is the case with three novels we visit this month. These books by seasoned novelists Karen Joy Fowler, Heather Graham, and Karen Hanson Stuyck also explore the complicated relationships between writers, their works, and their fans.

In a delightful departure for the author of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Karen Joy Fowler introduces mystery novelist A. B. Early in *WIT'S END* (Putnam, \$24.95). This is no conventional murder



mystery. There are mysteries to be solved, secrets to be uncovered, and even a possible murder to be revealed, but what drives this story is young Rima Lanisell's desire to learn more about her deceased father and his relationship to her godmother, Addison Early.

Invited by Addison to come to California and stay in her seaside home, "Wit's End," Rima is challenged to penetrate the very private author's wall of secrecy. Rima must garner clues from Addison's books—intriguingly, in one of them, Rima's father was incorporated as a character who murders his wife and becomes the arch nemesis of Addison's hero, the detective Maxwell Lane. More revelations come from Rima's explorations in the attic, which holds correspondence written to both Addison and Maxwell Lane, and by tracking the history of a cult named Holy City that had both a real existence in her father's life and a fictional existence in Addison's novels.

As with all of Fowler's novels, from her first, *Sarah Canary* (1991), to the present one, her sly wit and finely drawn characters are the chief attraction. *Wit's End* allows her to examine the relationships between an author and her characters, an author and her fans, fictional characters and readers, and between reali-

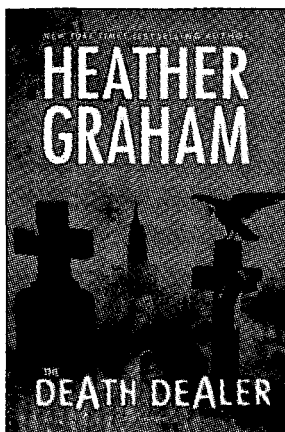
ty and the twists an author applies to transform it to fiction. Fowler aptly demonstrates that “fan” and “fanatic” derive from the same root. Whether you conclude that this novel does or does not belong in the mystery genre, it succeeds as a novel and as fine entertainment.

Heather Graham’s **THE DEATH DEALER** (MIRA, \$24.95) constructs a tale of murder, ghosts and romance around one of the most mysterious and romantic figures in crime fiction—Edgar Allan Poe. A sequel to her novel, *The Dead Room* (2007), it again features P.I. Joe Connolly and Genevieve O’Brien, a social worker from a privileged background, dedicated to helping New York’s prostitutes.

The murder of Thorne Bigelow, president of the New York Poe Society and author of what many considered the definitive biography of Edgar Allan Poe, has caused a sensation. His death was administered by poisoned wine, and the killer left a note reading “Quoth the raven: die.”

Although the police are investigating the murder, Genevieve insists on hiring Joe to look into the matter as well. Her chief concern is for the welfare of her mother, Eileen, who is also a member of the society, the members of which are called Ravens. Further killings and attempted killings, each with a link to one or more of Poe’s stories, terrorize the Ravens. Aiding in Joe’s investigation—or complicating it, at least—are two ghosts, Joe’s cousin Matt and his fiancée and Genevieve’s friend Leslie, characters from the earlier novel who “stayed on” to protect Genevieve and Joe.

As the suspicion switches from one Raven to another, Graham manages to take the investigation (and the reader) on a tour of some of the more important cities and places in Poe’s tragic life. A fast-paced blend of suspense, romance, murder and some helpful ghosts, the prolific Graham knows exactly what her readers want and delivers it with a light but assured touch.



Karen Hanson Stuyck takes a very different approach, although once again a fan(atic) plays a key role. In **A NOVEL WAY TO DIE** (Five Star, \$25.95), mystery novelist Katherine March of Austin, Texas, dies of an apparent heart attack just before a scheduled Christmas visit to Houston to see her daughter Molly, a criminology professor, and her family.

An autopsy, however, reveals that March died of an injected overdose of an anti-anxiety drug—a technique the author had used in one of her novels. More surprising discoveries follow and Molly's assumptions turn to accident or suicide before she gets even an inkling of foul play.

Once murder is on the table as an option, plenty of suspects emerge, including March's ex-husband (Molly's dad) and his wife who were in financial difficulties; March's dear friend Helen who inherited a cool million from her friend's death; an aggressive fan who wrote a thesis on March's novels but who wanted even more from the author; March's long-time literary agent whom she was ready to dump; and even March's sister Charlotte and their aged mother, who were alienated from the novelist.

Despite her profession, Molly has never dealt with a crime with such personal aspects. And she has other concerns to deal with as well—a trial separation from her wandering husband and the effect it's having on two children, ages ten and twelve.

Stuyck, who has published four other mystery novels and short stories in magazines such as *Redbook* and *Cosmopolitan*, has a relaxed, confident style that lends itself nicely to this family-oriented murder mystery. Molly Patterson isn't likely to join the ranks of investigators like Kinsey Millhone or V. I. Warshawski, but when her loved ones's lives are at stake and her mother's killer may go free, she proves her mettle is just as strong.

Tokyo's gritty Shinjuku district in 1990. Yakuza gangsters strike with impunity. The corrupt local police force turns a blind eye. The population lives in fear. Here, a lone, young cop, Samejima, pursues his prey, alienated from his own police force and feared by criminals for his uncompromising methods. He is the **SHINJUKU SHARK** (Vertical, \$14.95).

Published in Japan in 1990, this first installment of a wildly popular crime series won several mystery awards and launched Arimasa Osawa as one of Japan's most acclaimed mystery writers. Now, thanks to a recent translation by Andrew Clare, American readers can dive headlong into the Shinjuku Shark's world.

In the series debut, Samejima pursues a mysterious gunsmith whose illegal wares could supply a yakuza gang war. When a lone serial killer turns his murderous attention to police officers, shooting one member of the force each week, the pace of Samejima's investigation intensifies to satisfying effect. Through his pursuit, readers get a clear view of Shinjuku's underworld and the intriguing characters who populate it; yakuza gangsters, effete bar

owners, ineffectual bureaucrats, one quietly devastated cop who turns heroic, and Samejima's own spunky girlfriend Sho, the smart-mouthed lead singer of a popular local band. (The faint of heart should be warned about graphically described torture Samejima endures at the hands of a diabolical crook.)

Osawa devotes several chapters to the creepy point of view of a mysterious young man named Ed, who follows the murders on the news, envying the killer's notoriety. This wannabe criminal provides scary insight into the thoughts of a self-styled villain and some nice foreshadowing for future installments of the Shinjuku Shark series.

There are moments in the book when the pace feels a bit slow, as in the beginning, when Samejima's strained relationship with the police force is flatly explained as connected to a department employee's suicide. Perhaps some of these missteps may be attributed to the challenges of Japanese-to-English translation, but there are more than enough captivating scenes to keep readers of any language glued to the plot.

—*Laurel Fantauzzo*

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

AMRJ M AMR N'DF SRUER ZBMXBFQ TNSF JUC
BU OF MR IURFZB UCBTME, M AFXXJ XUOOFX UL
BIF XNPI, MRQ FRQFQ ZBMAVFQ NRBU ZTNAF.

—Y. S. PIFZBFXBUR

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 185

A PRIVATE BATTLE

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

Detective Martin Wyla, son of a Polish immigrant and a detective on the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, police force for almost twenty years, had seen teenagers stabbed over nurtured gang insults and men shot over soulless drug deals. These murders took their cold, calculating, and chemical reactions from the present.

But then came the murder of Peter Zimmer.

Wyla remembered the shock when he'd first seen Zimmer's body.

At the morgue, Dr. Lander, a robust, round-faced man, led Wyla to a gurney on which lay a figure covered with a white sheet.

Lander pulled down the sheet, talking while he did so. "Name's Zimmer. Peter Zimmer. Look at the skin."

"God," Wyla said. "He's steel gray. Even his lips. Except for the scar." The scar ran through Zimmer's eyebrow three times. An "N" scar. "The guy looks like some iceman who froze half a million years ago."

"Well," Lander said, "he's old all right. I'd say eighty-something, edging to ninety. Notice anything else?"

Wyla ran his eyes up and down the thin gray body. The skin lay on the bones like a rag that had crinkled as it lay drying on a radiator. "Looks like this guy starved to death."

"Well, he didn't. Though I doubt that he had much of an appetite over the last several weeks."

"So what killed him?"

"He's been poisoned."

"Poisoned?"

"He's been poisoned," Lander repeated. "Damn lucky one of the docs at the hospital had experience with thallium salts, or we all might have written off Zimmer's death as cause unknown."

"Thallium salts?"

"Heavy metal inorganic poison. Pretty deadly stuff. Colorless, odorless, dissolves pretty readily in liquid. Fifteen micrograms is enough to kill somebody."

"Where would somebody get thallium salts?"



Lander shrugged. "Wouldn't be easy. It's used in some labs for various chemical analyses. I'd say your job is to find out where the poison came from. Look for somebody with access to it on a continual basis. This guy's been ingesting the stuff for a while, probably a little at a time over several weeks. Then a day or two ago, somebody gave him another dose. A final dose that sent him off."

Wyla's common sense rebelled. "The guy's been ingesting poison for weeks? Wouldn't he have known he was being poisoned?"

"Not necessarily. If the thallium was given to him in small doses, it probably gave only a slightly off taste to whatever he ate or drank. He might have felt a bit nauseated, then recovered, then felt nauseated for longer periods. The poison would build up in his system, until he ingested enough to make him really sick. By the time he realized how sick he was, it was too late. Somebody had given him the fatal dose."

"You have the name of his closest relative?"

"Yeah, a brother." Lander leaned over and consulted some notes lying on a table. "Michael Zimmer. Lives down in Lansdale, near Philly."

The name Zimmer sounded vaguely familiar to Wyla, but he couldn't place it. He could ask his Uncle Marty. Marty knew everybody in town. Wyla thought again. He could just have Sergeant Reilly do some research. Less painful than visiting Marty. That way he could dodge a while longer looking at Marty's World War II pictures again or listening to Marty's story about bombs pulverizing Monte Cassino. Still, he owed Marty a visit.

He jerked his mind back to the body on the gurney. "Did the brother bring Zimmer into the hospital or did the hospital call the brother?"

Lander pulled the sheet up over the corpse. "Docs say the brother brought Zimmer in yesterday late afternoon. Zimmer was weak and in pain. Pretty considerable pain. He died late last night. A younger person might have lasted longer or even survived once he wasn't ingesting any more thallium. Zimmer was too old, and besides, his arteries were closing up again. He probably wouldn't have lasted a full year even if he hadn't been poisoned."

Wyla looked at the shrouded body. "Why poison a ninety-year-old with a bad heart? What the hell was the hurry that the poisoner couldn't wait a couple of months for the guy to die naturally?"

Lander chuckled. "Somebody sure wanted to kill him before he died."

Wyla frowned. "Why choose a slow poisoning?"

"Maybe you've got to look for somebody with some bills coming due in a while. That is, if Zimmer had any money to leave. Anyway, find the thallium and you find the killer."

Wyla nodded. "I'll start with the brother."

Michael Zimmer sat across from Detective Wyla's desk at police headquarters after a short and simple ceremony at the city's River Cemetery. Wyla studied Zimmer's eyes. They looked like windows that hadn't been washed for a while. If Michael Zimmer wasn't exactly rejoicing that his brother was dead, he wasn't exactly grieving either. Nor had he benefited from his brother's death, as least as far as Wyla could see, Zimmer having died with few worldly goods. What Wyla couldn't see, at least not right away, was exactly what Michael Zimmer was feeling.

Wyla consulted his notes. "You brought your brother to the hospital at about four yesterday afternoon. That right?"

"Yes. He called me earlier and said he was very sick. I drove up from Lansdale immediately."

"Doctors say that he was dying by the time you got him to the hospital. Did he tell you anything when you arrived at his house?"

Michael shook his head. "No. Just that he felt very ill. Of course, I knew Peter had heart trouble." Zimmer swept a hand over his chin. The chin jutted out like the front end of a road grader. "But someone giving him poison? I forget what the doctors called it."

"Thallium."

"Yes, that's it."

"Had you seen much of your brother over the last several years?" Wyla judged Michael to be only a few years younger than his brother, about the same height, though with a bit more black in the iron gray hair than Peter had had.

"No. I saw him rarely. My brother and I were not close, and I've been in California with my older daughter the last few weeks."

Wyla made a note to check out Michael's claim to have been in California, though it was very likely true. Too easily checked to lie about. "Had you and your brother had a falling out of some sort?"

The answer came quickly enough. "Nothing dramatic. Just the usual way siblings drift away from each other. You live separate lives in separate places, retire in separate places."

"Where had your brother lived in his adult life?"

"Well, here in Wilkes-Barre where we were born until he was about twenty or so. He moved to L.A. at one point. Was there I guess most of his life. He drifted around. Different places. I don't know them all."

"When did he return to Wilkes-Barre?"

Zimmer hesitated. "Maybe about a year ago. Rented that small coal company house we grew up in. I guess he made a life for himself here. I don't know."

"He have any friends here?"

"I don't know."

Wyla picked up a pen from his desk, examined it, and put it down. He couldn't tell yet what Zimmer didn't know and what he didn't want to tell. He let silence flow around Zimmer, watching for nervous tics—fingers smoothing hair, tongue licking lips, swallowing. Nothing. Zimmer was a rock. Wyla zeroed in on the first thing Zimmer had brushed over.

"What did your brother do in L.A.?"

"I know he worked in the meat business for a while. Processing plant. I couldn't tell you which one."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he might have sold cars." Zimmer looked annoyed. "Maybe some machinery work. I didn't keep a record."

"When was that?"

"Late thirties."

"And after that?"

Zimmer blinked. "I lost touch with him after the war. He didn't always inform me where he was or what he was doing. I led a family life. He didn't."

About seventy years of possible motives for murder, Wyla thought. It wouldn't be easy. "Have you any idea of who might have wanted him dead?"

"No. Look, I'm sorry he died. But I'm not anxious to know who killed him. Whatever Peter did was in the past. A hell of a thing to have it surface after so many years. Just as well to have it buried with him."

Wyla remembered what Lander had said: Somebody wanted to kill him before he died. "Sometimes," he said, "the past doesn't stay buried. Did your brother ever do anything that might have brought somebody's vendetta down on him?"

Michael didn't respond.

Wyla waited.

"Might be a number of activities that gave somebody cause to kill Peter."

"What is it your brother did that you do know about?"

Michael lifted his brows. "I didn't say I knew anything."

Wyla smiled his gentle, knowing smile. "No, you didn't. But you do."

Michael waved a hand. "My brother was a criminal. But I don't know any details. Didn't want to know. I don't buy the 'I'm my

brother's keeper' business. All I know is Peter got in some kind of trouble in L.A. Got shot and almost lost an eye."

Wyla nodded. "He had a scar."

"Yeah. A scar. Anyway, he took off when he got out of the hospital. As I said, I don't know exactly what kind of trouble he got into there."

"How long ago was the trouble in L.A.?"

Michael thought. "Maybe sixty some years ago. Peter disappeared after that."

A flash went off in Wyla's head, and the picture of Uncle Marty, returning from World War II with an arm missing, materialized out of the light. "Sixty or so years ago. A lot of young men were drafted then. World War II. Was Peter?"

"The trouble was before the war."

Wyla smiled. He'd learned in his rookie days that sometimes people revealed more by what they didn't say than by what they did say. "All right," he said. "I'll check with the L.A. police. One more question. You said that whatever Peter did, it was a hell of a thing to have it surface now. Any particular reason?"

Zimmer nodded. "Yes. My granddaughter is getting married next week. The family doesn't need any trouble now."

Wyla remembered why the name Zimmer was familiar. "She's marrying Senator McCarey, isn't she? It's been in the papers. And McCarey is likely to run for governor next year."

"Yes. Frankly, if Peter's death has something to do with his activities in L.A., I doubt any of us will ever know the details. Anyway, it's all over now. I'd like all this kept as quiet as possible."

"I'll do what I can." Wyla considered the bait. Zimmer was dangling a fly to distract from the juicy worm wriggling elsewhere. "One or two more questions. Why did your brother return to Wilkes-Barre?"

Zimmer shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe because he was old and sick and he had the old family house here."

"What time did he call to tell you he was sick?"

"Sometime in the afternoon."

"You said you hadn't seen him much?"

"That's right. I have my own life."

Wyla frowned. He often felt that way about visiting Marty. He didn't appreciate the irony of Zimmer's making him feel guilty. "So why did he call you then?"

Zimmer said nothing for a moment. "I don't know. I suppose ... it's because I'm the only family he has."

"I see. How long will you be in Wilkes-Barre?"

"I'm leaving in a day or two. As soon as I dispose of my brother's belongings. Car, things like that."

Wyla checked his notes for an address and phone number. "I'll contact you in Lansdale if I need to. And, uh, I'm sorry about your brother."

Zimmer stared at Wyla a moment, then rose and left.

Relief, Detective Wyla thought. Well, Zimmer wouldn't be the first sibling glad to be rid of a troublesome brother.

Wyla checked his watch. He could grab some supper at the diner, then get over to the assisted living home and get this month's visit over with. He didn't know what time Marty went to bed. That was probably something he should know.

Before he left the station, Wyla tossed the job of checking records to his assistant, Detective Reilly, who was good with records and computers.

At the diner, Wyla pushed around his stuffed cabbages and considered Michael Zimmer. Michael knew more about his brother than he'd been willing to tell. Why keep his brother's activities hidden? Shame? A powerful enough motive, but likely to dissolve in the face of murder. Maybe guilt. Would Michael have killed an inconvenient brother to avoid scandal? To save a granddaughter's very advantageous marriage? Not likely. Even if some muckraking reporter dug up Peter's past, the damage would be minimal. So why did Zimmer feel threatened or, at least, feel that his granddaughter's marriage was threatened by possible scandalous stories about his brother?

Wyla decided to canvas the neighbors tomorrow while Reilly tapped computer keys.

He finished his dinner, delayed leaving by rereading the newspaper, then drove over to the assisted living home. He spent forty minutes looking at pictures of Marty in Pisa and at Monte Cassino. When an aide came to help put Marty to bed at eight, Wyla left. Relief and a touch of guilt.

Late the next morning, Detective Reilly gave Wyla a report. In detail. Wyla had no doubt that Reilly had checked every record in the nation and maybe even beyond.

"Someday, I'll show you how to access the records with Boolean logic," Reilly said, his green eyes shining, slender fingers tapping as if a keyboard lay beneath them.

Wyla wondered if in an earlier century, Reilly would have been a pianist. "Yeah, someday," he said. "What's Boolean? Never mind. What did you find?"

"I'd say Zimmer was one lucky bastard to live as long as he did."

He was mixed up with some pretty dangerous people, maybe even with elements of the Las Vegas crime syndicate. LAPD says he stole money from some syndicate guys. Stupid thing to do. He ended up in a parking lot with a bullet in his chest and one that grazed his skull, just over his eyebrow. Recovered, then skipped town. That was right before the war. About 1938. He disappeared all right. There's no police record of him from '38 to about '48. He showed up in L.A. again in the fifties. A few convictions, off and on for thirty years: robbery, some drug running, a touch of extortion. Nothing for a while after that. Small-time crime in a couple of cities. Then he turns up here in Wilkes-Barre. I checked the banks. He had some money."

"How much?"

"Not much. About three thousand. He bought a used car recently too."

"So we have a record of crime, with maybe one or more of his colleagues after him for something, missing years during World War II, and a recent return to Wilkes-Barre."

"That's about it."

"Not much help."

Reilly looked up, grinning. "But the computer yielded something interesting." He waited.

Wyla noticed that Reilly's red hair turned a little redder as it always did, at least to Wyla, when computers were involved. "What did the damn computer cough up?"

"Zimmer isn't the guy's full name."

"Oh?"

"It's Zimmerovsky. With a y. Russian."

Wyla grinned this time. "Yeah? Well, my full name isn't Wyla. It was Wylakowski before my father shortened it. Not too incriminating, unless you're telling me Zimmer was a member of the Russian mafia."

Reilly sighed. His hair faded back to reddish brown. "Couldn't find any evidence of that. Anyway, the guy was too old for that. If anything, he was good old American-bred mafia."

"Did you check army records?"

"I checked all service records. Nothing. No Zimmer or Zimmerovsky."

Wyla rested his square jaw on his big left hand. "Wonder where he went." Missing years. A hole in Zimmer's life.

"So," Reilly said. "The best we have so far is one of his, let's say, former colleagues, might have killed him. In-house murder, so to speak."

Wyla shook his head. "Not satisfying. First of all, why now? Your

record hunt turned up no recent crimes. I could even buy the idea of an old mafia vendetta if Zimmer had been shot or stabbed or strung up on some tree in a park somewhere. Short and sweet. But thallium salts? Over weeks? I don't think so. Hit men don't usually keep thallium around."

"Who does?"

"Yeah. Where's the poison? A continuous supply. Lander says that's the key."

They both kept silent for a moment.

Wyla started when Reilly cleared his throat. Reilly was looking at him the way some nurses looked at patients who hadn't eaten their meals. "I looked up thallium salts on the Internet."

"Thallium salts were once used in rat poisoning," Wyla said. "Hospitals and universities have it on hand for various reasons. I used an encyclopedia," Wyla said. "Ever hear of those? Got everything from chemistry to history."

Reilly looked hurt. "I found all that out too. I thought the rat poisoning was a possibility, but computer says thallium hasn't been used in rat poisoning for decades now."

Wyla meant to give Reilly a nice gentle smile, but his mind had started processing information. "A decades-old poison. Kept where? In somebody's old cellar? Until the right time? An old score to settle?" He thought of Uncle Marty's stories of World War II. Plenty of material for vengeance out of that war, like somebody discovering that Zimmer had been an officer in a concentration camp. Wyla shook his head. Zimmer was Russian, not German. Still, missing years that coincided with the war, a war with more human evil and tragedy than most, if not all, the wars of the last thousand years put together. Where had Zimmer spent the war?

Reilly cleared his throat again.

The phone rang.

Wyla grabbed it after one ring, just to prove to Reilly that he wasn't getting hard of hearing. "Yeah," he said. He listened. "Another one? What do we have here? A serial killer?" He listened again. "Right. I'll get over there."

"A serial killer?" Reilly asked.

"Probably something more harmless. Like a coincidence. But we do have another case. Old woman this time."

Reilly's eyebrows shot up. "Poisoned? Like Zimmer?"

"No. A niece called in after she found her aunt at the bottom of a cellar stairway. Said she thinks someone pushed the aunt down the stairs. Aunt's injured, but she didn't die. The thing is, she lived near Zimmer. So we're on this one, just in case something other than coincidence is at work. Let's go. The niece is at the hospital."

Wyla heaved himself out of his chair, wondering if he should call Marty and tell him to lock the door of his room, then he grabbed a cup of coffee and left the office, Reilly on his heels.

Happy to see that the waiting room at the hospital was empty, providing privacy for the niece, Wyla introduced himself and Reilly.

"I found my Aunt Hedwig this morning," the niece said, dabbing at reddened eyes. "The doctors think she'd been there for at least a whole day. Thank God I went over early this morning before work. I should have gone over last week. I knew it. I just knew it."

"Knew what, Miss Rowinski?"

"That something was wrong. I mean I felt it for weeks. I should have gone sooner. I just should have made her tell me what was wrong. I was just so busy."

Wyla nodded. "I know. We're all too busy. Take it easy, Miss Rowinski. If your aunt fell, it isn't really your fault."

"No, but . . . I know this sounds paranoid, Detective, but I don't believe she did fall. I think someone might have pushed her."

"What makes you think so?"

The niece took a deep breath. "My aunt is not a fragile woman. She is eighty-five, but she is strong. She cooks her own meals, cleans her own house, and walks half a mile several times a week. She never misses a step." Miss Rowinski stopped and looked pleadingly at Wyla.

"I get the picture," Wyla said.

"Okay. But the last couple of months, she's been different. This is the hard part to explain. She seemed upset, as if she were, I don't know, preoccupied."

"Preoccupied with what? Did you ask?"

"Of course I asked," Miss Rowinski said. "She said she was fine, but that the present wasn't important anymore. That's how she put it."

"Do you have any idea what she meant?"

"Well, at first, I thought she was getting old." Miss Rowinski sighed. "Not that she wasn't old. But somehow, getting older. Fast. You know how older people sometimes retreat into the past, tell the same stories over and over, talk about their youth." She looked at Wyla for confirmation.

Wyla thought of Marty. "I know," he said. "Go on."

"It was as if she were waiting for something to happen. I thought maybe she was sick or something." Miss Rowinski threw up her hands. "And then this fall. If it was a fall. I know it isn't much to go on, Detective, but I know something was very wrong." Miss Rowinski shook her head. "Poor Aunt Hedwig. She's had a lot of

tragedy in her life. She was in Europe during World War II. In Poland."

"In a concentration camp?" Wyla asked, feeling his brain stirring around some notions.

"Oh no. Actually, she was in the northeastern part of Poland. I'm not sure exactly where." Miss Rowinski shook her head. "I guess I didn't really pay much attention to the details. I mean World War II. I wasn't even born then. It's past history. My aunt said she had to work for Germans, then Russians. I don't know exactly what she did. It was slave labor, she said, but I guess it kept her alive."

The stirrings in Wyla's brain began to jell. "Did your aunt ever talk about any Russian who'd been particularly cruel? Rape? Torture? Anything like that?"

Miss Rowinski's eyes widened. "No. Never. I mean, she didn't like Russians. I guess most Poles didn't, probably still don't. But she never said any of them actually did anything to her."

"I see," Wyla said. "When your aunt comes out of the sedatives, Miss Rowinski, try to get her to talk a little. Don't press it if the doctors want her quiet. In the meantime, I'll go over the house tomorrow and check over the stairway where she fell."

"Of course." Miss Rowinski fumbled in her purse. "I have a key to her house, and I took hers when I came with the ambulance." She handed a large key to Wyla.

"Did you move or disturb anything in the house when you entered?"

Miss Rowinski thought. "I came in through the kitchen and dining area. It's all one room. Then I saw that the cellar door was open. I thought my aunt was down in the cooler where she keeps canned goods, drinks, things like that. So I called out." She paused, reliving her movements. "I didn't get an answer, so I started down the stairs. That's when I saw her. I raced down. I didn't move her. I know you're not supposed to. I had my cell phone and called 911. I stayed with her until the ambulance came." Miss Rowinski paused. "So, no. No. I didn't disturb anything."

"Miss Rowinski, do you know if your aunt knew a Mr. Peter Zimmer?"

Miss Rowinski nodded. "Yes. Once when I went over, he was there. He left when I came. Why?"

"Did your aunt tell you anything about him?"

Miss Rowinski frowned. "No. Just that he was a neighbor. Why?"

"Probably nothing. Now one more thing, Miss Rowinski. When you get the go-ahead from me, check around the house. I can't tell you what to look for, but check the mail, calendars, anything that might indicate something unusual in your aunt's life."

"I'm staying here all night, if they'll let me."

"Fine. If I see any reason to call in a forensics team, I won't want you in the house for a day or so anyway."

Wyla sought out the doctors for Mrs. Rowinski, but they had little to tell him, except that, though it had been close, they expected the woman to live, at least for a while.

One of the doctors had also treated Peter Zimmer. "Mrs. Rowinski has not been poisoned," he reassured Wyla.

"But," Wyla said, "you didn't know Zimmer had been poisoned until he was already dead, right?"

"Wrong. Before he died, Zimmer said he was being poisoned. I admit we thought at first that he was probably delusional, but he was not able to hold down whatever it was he had drunk in the afternoon, and the tests showed he was right. Unfortunately, it was too late to save him."

Wyla stared. "Zimmer actually said he was being poisoned?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did he say who he thought poisoned him?"

"No. He was very, very ill. He could hardly walk or talk. He just mumbled about being poisoned before he lost consciousness."

Wyla nodded. "If you find out anything more on Mrs. Rowinski, let me know."

"What do you think?" Reilly asked when they were back in the car.

For a moment, Wyla watched raindrops splatter on the windshield. Then he turned on the wipers. "Don't know. Could be we have a pretty perceptive niece. Could be we have a niece with paranoid tendencies." Wyla stared at the wipers. World War II. No record. Two old people, one dead, slowly poisoned, one meant to be dead. He fished out his notebook and called Michael Zimmer. He told Zimmer about Mrs. Rowinski's fall and asked if he knew about any connection between her and his brother.

"Don't know," Zimmer said. "Is she dead?"

"Well, she's injured but not dead. The doctors expect that she'll recover. I might need to talk to you again after I see her."

Zimmer didn't respond.

Wyla rung off.

By nine the next morning, Wyla, with Reilly in tow, pulled his Taurus up to a clapboard house, a typical older home with the front yard only five feet deep from porch to sidewalk. Wyla had grown up in a house like this. He stepped out of the car and stood looking at the house. It had two gables, a green shingled roof that

needed attention, a porch with two columns, and a green swing. The white of the house's wood had grayed, rather like the color of Zimmer's skin.

"What are we looking for here?" Reilly said.

"Don't know. Maybe I'll know it if I see it." Wyla felt a little sorry for Reilly. He thought Reilly would feel more confident doing a virtual tour of the house on his computer.

Wyla climbed the six porch steps. The top one squeaked and dipped a little beneath his step. To the left, lacy curtains, gray with age and dust, hung behind a large window whose central pane was flanked by stained glass panels over which snaked purplish vines. The walnut wood of the front door was deeply carved with peaked arches. Wyla stared at the dark wood. He was reluctant to enter. He felt as if the secrets behind the door were best left buried in the past, as if to exhume them would raise clouds of pestilent air it was best not to breathe.

Behind him, Reilly coughed. "Funny sort of old house, isn't it?"

Wyla nodded, glad to know that the aura of decay and miasma was not something he'd conjured in his mind. Young, computer-smart Reilly had felt it too. Reilly, Wyla thought, had potential.

Wyla pulled from his pocket the key Miss Rowinski had given him. Iron gray, it had a large open head and a body of almost four inches, with the serrations on a double block at the end of the stem. It was heavy with the weight of lead and years. He slid it into the door lock. The key turned with a satisfying clap.

Wyla pushed open the door and stepped into the large open combination kitchen and dining room. In the middle stood a heavy red mahogany table. To the left, past an old porcelain sink and a new stove, a door stood open. Stairs descended. At the top lay pieces of glass. Red-brown splotches stained the small tan rug. Wyla knelt and touched the stain. He could not tell what it was.

"All right," Wyla said to Reilly behind him. "Let's check down the cellar first."

They descended carefully, avoiding any touch to the round banister that ran down on the right wall. Wyla noted that the treads on the stairs were in good condition. No rips or bulges to cause a trip. From the last step, he sidled over to the edge and down, avoiding the probable spot where Mrs. Rowinski had lain unconscious. More broken glass lay on the basement floor.

Wyla pointed to a piece. "Looks like the stem of a wine glass." He looked around. He could see no stains on the brown linoleum. He looked at the banister, wondering if Mrs. Rowinski had managed to catch it at the last moment, saving herself from a worse blow to her head than she had received. He turned to Reilly. "I

don't see anything here that sheds light on how or why she fell, but we'll have forensics check out the glass and the stains. I'm going back up. You poke around here. I can't tell you what you're looking for. But check around. The shelves, the cabinets, whatever."

Wyla started back up the stairs. As he climbed, he ticked off what he was looking for. He'd been a detective quite long enough to know that finding revealing letters or audio cassettes with a victim's or murderer's life story happened only in B-grade thrillers. But real people did keep pictures and mementos. Perhaps Mrs. Rowinski had kept something that connected her to Zimmer as more than a neighbor.

He stood for a moment in the kitchen-dining room, then rejected looking there first. People didn't keep mementos in a kitchen. He walked into the next room. A blue sofa in mint condition sat against a wall next to the door that led to a backyard. A worn, tan cloth recliner sat in front of a TV. On the wall above the TV hung a black-and-white print with more than a hundred faces on it, and in the middle, a crowned eagle.

Wyla recognized the print. His grandmother had had one: a print of the kings of Poland.

He looked round again. On the table next to the recliner was a basket with needles and wool. This was the room where Mrs. Rowinski had spent her time. This was the room that would have mementos.

He opened the top drawer of the table and picked up a photo album. He sat in the recliner and flipped pages. He recognized the niece and assumed the man and women in some of the pictures were her parents. He ran through the typical postcards: Hawaii, San Diego, Yellowstone Park, a dozen others. Most seemed to be from the niece and her parents. About halfway into the album, he found a picture that gave him pause.

In the black and white photo, an officer in double-breasted uniform had struck a stiff pose, his dark hair swept back from his high forehead, his dark mustache arcing over the sides of his mouth, his crossed hands clasping leather gloves. His high cheekbones lent him a sculptured look that Wyla had seen in the pale face of Mrs. Rowinski. Her father, Wyla wondered. The picture had a date pasted at the top: 1939. Wyla was no expert in army uniforms, but he guessed that this man, if he were Mrs. Rowinski's father, had been an officer in the Polish army. World War II again.

Wyla sat flipping through mental pictures of World War II tragedies. There were certainly plenty of them: the concentration camps, the siege of Leningrad, the beaches at Normandy. Then he thought of one that most people did not know, espe-

cially if they were not of Polish origin or did not have an Uncle Marty who kept close tabs on every account of World War II: the slaughter at Katyn. At least five thousand Polish army officers had been shot and buried in the forest. A crime of World War II, forgotten by most until the fall of the Soviet Union unburied the records of the past. Marty said he'd always guessed the Russians had done it.

Wyla started at Reilly's voice booming from the kitchen stairway. "Haven't seen much of interest down here so far. The usual stuff old people have. Lots of newspapers and magazines stuffed in the cabinets. Want me to go through them?"

"Not now," Wyla said. "I think we need to talk to Mrs. Rowinski. It's a wild guess, but maybe," he added to himself.

Reilly came into the room, and Wyla tucked the picture of the Polish officer into his shirt pocket. "You know anything about World War II, Reilly?"

"Sure. I know we won."

"Know anything else? Ever hear of a place called Katyn?"

"No. Was that in the Pacific?"

"Not exactly. It was the site of a massacre that happened in the forests at Smolensk, in Russia, under Stalin around 1940. Check it out on your computer, Reilly." Wyla grinned. He didn't expect Reilly to know about Katyn or World War II. That was history, as Miss Rowinski had said. Except maybe, maybe if you were in your eighties, that war wasn't just a piece of history.

On the way out of the house, Wyla told Reilly to contact a forensics team to collect the broken glass and test the stains.

At the hospital, Wyla spoke with Mrs. Rowinski's doctor.

"She's taken a bad blow, but she's regained consciousness. She is basically okay for now. I think she had a mild stroke, but she can talk. I've put her on blood thinners, but I can't operate on the carotid artery. She's just too old."

"I'll go easy," Wyla said. "But I need to ask a few questions."

"Get the niece's permission."

Wyla did.

In her hospital bed, Mrs. Rowinski looked tired, but not frail. Her brown eyes were bright, her skin thin, but pale pink, not gray. Her lips moved as the fingers of her left hand slid slowly over the blue crystal beads of a rosary. Her right hand was still and stiff.

Wyla hesitated, then went ahead. "Mrs. Rowinski," Wyla said. He pulled out the picture he had taken from the photo book. "Is this your father?"

Mrs. Rowinski looked at the photo. Her eyes darkened. "Father," she said.

Wyla nodded. "He was a Polish officer?"

Mrs. Rowinski blinked.

Wyla wanted to stop. He wanted to go home, have a beer, and watch a movie. This was not his business. It was no one's business. It belonged in the past. Zimmer was beyond help and no one cared anyway. He wanted to let Mrs. Rowinski rest.

He took a breath and pressed on. "Was he at Katyn? Was he murdered with five thousand other Polish officers?"

Mrs. Rowinski closed her eyes.

Wyla pulled his chair closer to the bed. "From what I've heard," he said, "I don't care about Zimmer. I don't care what happened to him. Especially if what I'm thinking is so. Your niece said you knew him."

Mrs. Rowinski opened her eyes and looked at Wyla.

Maybe, he thought, he was only imagining it. But he'd read a lot of eyes in his years as a detective. And he was reading sorrow now, and fear, and something else. He thought of Zimmer's brother. Relief. Something finally over. "Did you know Zimmer in Poland, when you were working for the Russians? Was Zimmer there? Was he involved?"

Mrs. Rowinski's voice rasped, but it was clear enough. "They were both there."

Wyla stared. Two brothers of nearly the same age. Both eligible for the draft. Yet Reilly had found no Zimmer or Zimmerovsky in the army records. Wyla now guessed why. Both brothers had left the country.

Mrs. Rowinski's lips moved.

Wyla bent nearer to her.

"He boasted," she said.

"Peter Zimmer? He boasted about it?"

Mrs. Rowinski nodded.

"But how did you know him so many years later?" Wyla smiled. "Of course. The scar. Over the eyebrow. So you gave him what? Wine? Gradually, with the rat poison?"

She moved her head up and down slowly in a kind of proud affirmation. "Is he dead?"

"Yes. He died yesterday. Had you told him what you'd been giving him?"

Mrs. Rowinski closed her eyes. Her breath came out in a long sigh. "No. He saw me." She let go of the rosary and lifted her hand. "He came often at noon. For a glass of wine. I kept the wine in my cool cellar. I would take two glasses and go down to get the wine."

She paused. "And the poison. This time, he must have come down to the cellar and stood on the steps. I didn't see him at first." She stopped.

Wyla waited.

"I took the box of poison from the cabinet. From behind some magazines. I put the poison into one of the glasses."

She stopped again.

Wyla had the eerie feeling that she was confessing, not as to a policeman, but as to a priest.

"He must have watched me do it," she went on. "Then he went back up the stairs. I went up too. He asked me why I was poisoning him. I told him."

"He pushed you down the stairs then?"

Mrs. Rowinski nodded.

"Then left you?"

"Not right away. He came down. He stood over me and cursed me. He took the poison from the cabinet and looked at it. Then he put it on a table near the cabinet." She closed her eyes, then opened them. "He came again."

"He came again?" Wyla said. "How much later?"

"I don't know. I'd lain there for a while. It seemed a long time to me. He stood over me. He cursed me again. I heard him. I don't know what happened after that. Until I woke up here." She pulled the cross on the rosary toward her lips, then lowered it. Her thin lips moved and her eyes closed. Wyla leaned to hear the words. "Forgive me, for I have sinned."

Wyla stood, shaken. He refused to push her any more. She opened her eyes and Wyla saw in them a resignation, like an overflowing creek subsiding after a storm. "I'll leave you now," he said. "Your niece will be in. You won't have to talk to me again for a while."

Mrs. Rowinski did not answer. She stared ahead, as if seeing something from which she could not remove her eyes.

Wyla left the room. He headed back to Mrs. Rowinski's house. He parked and stood looking up at the old house. Old house. Old poison. And an old hatred.

He entered the house and went straight to the stairs. The glass fragments had not yet been collected by the forensics team. Wyla stepped round them and took the first step down. He stopped. He did not want to find the poison. He thought of Mrs. Rowinski clutching her rosary, lifting it to her lips and then withdrawing it. What was it she had said? Forgiveness, Wyla thought. She had asked for forgiveness.

Wyla sighed. He was a detective, and it was his job to find the

poison. Mrs. Rowinski had the poison, and the possessor of the poison was the murderer.

Wyla continued down the stairs, counting them to shut his mind off.

In the basement, he went over to the table where Mrs. Rowinski had seen Zimmer put the box of poison. Nothing.

He stood, letting his mind begin to sift what Mrs. Rowinski had said: "He came again."

He thought of what Lander had said. "Find the poison and find the murderer."

Mrs. Rowinski had kept it in the cabinet.

Wyla opened the cabinet. The top shelf was stuffed with a pile of old *Life* magazines and newspapers. Wyla pulled them out.

He reached in and took out the box with the skull and crossbones. Its thick gray cardboard was yellow with age. He turned it over and looked at the ingredients: thallium.

Wyla looked from the cabinet to the table beside it. Peter Zimmer had put the box on the table. Why wasn't it there? He must have rushed home, knowing that he had been ingesting poison for some time. He'd called his brother, telling him what had happened and why.

He had certainly told the doctor and would most certainly have told his brother.

Wyla clicked off times in his mind. Michael Zimmer had brought his brother to the hospital at four. Peter Zimmer had been at Mrs. Rowinski's at noon. Four hours to account for. Michael drove up from Lansdale. That accounted for an hour and a half. What about the remaining two and one half hours?

Suppose the second visit had come not from Peter, who was already ill, but from Michael Zimmer. Suppose Michael took some poison, put the box back into the cabinet where Peter might have easily told him Mrs. Rowinski kept it. Maybe he gave the final dose to his brother, ridding himself of the two people who knew of his role at Katyn so many decades ago. Then he had waited until his brother was so ill he could barely speak before driving him to the hospital.

Wyla remembered the relief in Michael Zimmer when he'd talked to him. Peter and Mrs. Rowinski. Both gone. And the past erased. Or so he thought.

Wyla turned and looked at the fragments of glass. She must have dropped one at the top of the stairs when Peter confronted her. The other flew down with her and broke at the bottom.

Mrs. Rowinski had poisoned Peter Zimmer all right, but Wyla would bet that she had not administered the final dose.

Wyla jumped when his cell phone rang.

"We just got the police report," Reilly said. "Michael Zimmer is dead. A car accident, they think. On Route 611. A truck accident again. Damn highway."

Wyla caught his breath. "What do you mean by 'they think'?"

He heard Reilly rustling papers.

"Well, the accident was head-on. The driver of the truck claims that Zimmer drove his car right smack into him. Maybe the guy had a heart attack or something. One more thing. The police found an envelope with three thousand dollars in it."

"I see." Wyla stood for a moment with his head bowed. He was sure now. He had told Michael Zimmer that Mrs. Rowinski would live. Had Michael been worried enough to drive carelessly? Perhaps Michael's death had been an accident. But perhaps it had been suicide. Wyla thought so. He knew now that he'd also seen determination in Michael Zimmer. If it took murder and suicide for his granddaughter, Michael Zimmer would do it. As for the money, it explained Peter Zimmer's return to Wilkes-Barre. He was getting or extorting money from his brother, maybe for silence.

"Martin? You there yet?" Reilly said.

Wyla decided. "Sorry for the delay in telling you this. I'm calling off the forensics team. Before he left town, Mike Zimmer called me. Said he found rat poison in his brother's apartment. Said he found a suicide note. I'll explain all this later."

Reilly didn't respond. Wyla was pretty sure Reilly didn't buy the story that cleared Mrs. Rowinski. But he'd go along once he got the truth. The niece too.

Wyla rang off. It would be hard. He'd have to persuade Mrs. Rowinski that the poison she administered had not killed Peter Zimmer. He'd have to face skepticism from his superiors. But he had a good chance of getting away with it. Nobody would care that much about two old people and a war fading into the history books. ↗

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 112. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the September issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Band-Aid, say	25	63	101	189	86	82	1	61	129
B. Small compartment	10	93	66	135	98	122	30	186	50
C. Caudal soup ingredient	169	146	47	137	40	69			
D. Crucifer root	132	3	168	17	78	153			
E. Coughs up	112	54	13	103	194	176			
F. Showing a presence of life	43	173	109	190	179	27	143	131	91
G. East Texas city	42	160	51	84	178	107	87	92	57
H. Shorten	164	35	133	156	128	199	77	125	113 118
I. William and Harry, to Princess Anne	72	96	188	195	167	152	32		
J. Had a grooming mishap	182	8	102	39	49	162			
K. Vivid and seemingly realistic	134	74	83	148	38	140	200	184	70
L. Acted like a worm	97	16	175	79	141	170	126		
M. North England hog	105	192	4	191	59	159	172	115	90
N. Impromptu: 3 wds.	99	2	34	18	62	196	158	180	193 116
O. Coiled unit	120	24	197	12	88	45	5	36	
P. Hardly sassed	58	33	81	155	73	165	14	71	

THE TREASURE HUNTER

BRENDAN DUBOIS

At the town dump in Purmort, New Hampshire, people come by to exchange gossip, to admire someone's new pickup truck, to get weather predictions from the old timers, to pick through the free offerings at the dump store (or treasures, depending on one's point of view), and every spring and fall to pass out campaign brochures for various official candidates ranging from town cemetery trustee to President of the United States.

Oh, yeah, there's two other things people do at the dump. The first is dumping trash. The second is doing business.

Being the sole female private investigator in this part of rural New Hampshire, my clients usually come to see me at my tiny office near the town common, but on this spring Saturday, a client came right up to me at the town dump.

The town dump is officially known as the Purmort Recycling Center and Waste Transfer Station, but nobody calls it that, except for these new people in town who drive Volvos and SUVs with their old Massachusetts license plates. It's the dump, though recycling does occur. People drive up to a squat concrete building with open bays and dump household trash in one bay, folded cardboard in another, bottles in another, plastic soda bottles in yet another, and aluminum cans in another. Saturday afternoons are usually busy at the dump, but since my trash collection for the week is pretty minimal—just the debris collected from me and a moody cat named Roscoe—I can typically get in and out within a few minutes, depending on the traffic.

Traffic. Oh yes, the traffic, for there are about six parking spaces in front of the dump building, and if a couple of the local restaurant owners come in with their weekly haul, and if a couple of good ol' boys start chatting over the hoods of their respective pickup trucks about how their misuses won't let them go fishing

next weekend, then traffic can back up all the way out to the main road.

Which is why I try to be fast, going in and out, but on this Saturday morning, business stumbled my way.

I had just finished dumping three diet cola cans in the aluminum can bin and was working my way back to my Ford Explorer when a heavyset man stopped in front of me, black beard down to his chest, wearing stained tan chino workpants and jacket.

"You K. C. Dunbar, the private eye?" he asked.

I froze, glancing at the relative safety of my Explorer just a few feet away. I try not to discriminate against male clients, but I've found that most of them come into my office humiliated at having to hire a woman to do something they can't do, and that often leads to heated words and threats of violence when I can't solve their problem with a phone call or two. Which is why when I do meet male clients, I make sure my Ruger .357 magnum revolver is within easy reach.

Which it wasn't at the moment. It was snug in its leather holster in the glove compartment of my SUV, and this menacing bulky fellow was between me and it. I suppose if push came to shove, the other men about me at the dump site would come to my aid, but in the process, I might get bumped, scraped, or bruised, and that's not high on my list of things to do on a Saturday afternoon.

But I'm not one for backing down. Near me was a scrap lumber pile, and if my questioner made any move, I would step back and take a surplus two-by-four and smash it over his head, and if I overreacted, I would blame it on the vapors or the sun in my eyes or something.

So I said, "Yes, I'm K. C. Dunbar. What's up?"

He stared at me and shuffled his feet. "I'd like to hire you, that's what."

I gave him my best not-in-your-lifetime-am-I-flirting-with-you smile and said, "That's nice. My office hours are Monday through Friday, nine A.M. to four P.M., and Saturday, ten to noon, unless I'm working an investigation. If I'm not around, leave a message and we'll make an appointment and—"

He shook his head. "Can't do that. I'm working up in Trenton, clearing off a lot for the new Wal-Mart. Working dawn to dusk. Can't get the time off to see you during the week. I need to see you now."

I shook my head. "Sorry, I can't help you. My policy is to meet clients in my office in town and—"

And just as I thought, he took a step toward me, and I took a

step toward the lumber pile, and then he said, "I need you to find my mom."

Then this bear of a man, who looked like he killed small animals for a hobby, started blubbering like a five-year-old whose puppy just went lost.

"Please?" he asked, tears running down his cheeks. "Will you please find my mom?"

What could I say?

I said, "Let's talk." And that's how it started.

Seeing the line of cars backing up and the impatient looks of the drivers—and who could blame them, sitting there with smelly trash in the back, while their chatty neighbors passed the time in front of the dumpster bins?—I said, "Look, let's meet over at the dump store, okay?"

And he nodded and sniffed and ran the back of his hand across his nose. He went to the other side of the lot to a rusted and muddy Jeep, and I got into my Ford and drove the hundred or so feet to the dump store.

The store is an open shack, about twenty feet square, where used books, CDs, clothes, and other bits and pieces of electronics and furnishings are tossed inside and picked over by bargain hunters and the like. But don't be misled by the name. Nothing's for sale, it's always free, and it's first come, first serve. Whatever's left over at the end of the week is thrown into the main trash pile. I always stop at the dump store on the way out—I'm a sucker for old paperback detective novels, but I leave everything else to the pros, which we do have. They're called seagulls by their less charitable neighbors, and they have a delightful scam working. What they do is salvage what they can, take it back home, and on Sunday, they sell it at yard sales or tag sales, depending on your point of view.

I parked at the other end of the store, while my new client pulled up behind me. He got out of the Jeep, puffing a bit from the exertion, and came over and held out a callused and soiled hand. "George Pembroke. Nice to meet you."

I returned the shake, trying not to wince, and said, "Karen Dunbar. Or K. C. Whatever you like."

George nodded, smiling, the only evidence now of his crying being his red-rimmed eyes. "Sorry I came up on you like that, but with my job, well, I can't get away to meet you at your office."

"So how did you know to find me here?"

He shrugged massive shoulders. "Everybody comes here eventually, so I waited for you."

"You did? How long did you wait for me, then?"

Another shrug. "Since the dump opened. At eight A.M."

I did a quick calculation and said, "George, you've been here for more than six hours? Waiting to see if I showed up?"

"That's right."

I leaned back against the front fender of my SUV. "All right. You said you're looking for your mom?"

"Uh-huh. I haven't seen her for nearly a month."

"Have you gone to the police?"

"Oh, sure I have," he said. "But they can't help. Unless there's evidence of a crime, they won't do nothin'. And there ain't no evidence of a crime. So I thought I'd come to you."

Missing persons . . . not a type of investigation work I'm used to, but still . . .

"Okay," I said. "Before you tell me any more, I've to let you know about my rates. I charge eighty dollars an hour, there's no guarantee of success, and I give you an oral report every day, and a written report once a week, until you and I decide to part ways."

George smiled and said, "That's fine. Here, I'll pay you up front."

I started to say something but George was quicker than me. He reached into one of the pockets of his chino pants, pulled out a soiled lump of bills, and peeled off four. He passed them over to me.

Eighty dollars. For one hour's work.

"All right," I said. "But you realize that's just for an hour, right?"

"Sure," he said. "'Cause I'm sure you'll find her in an hour."

"And why's that?"

"'Cause I know where she lives," he said, smiling confidently.

I almost gave him back his money at that point, but something about the snuffling big man in front of me—like a grizzly bear who had a taste for doughnuts and not raw flesh—fascinated me. "All right," I said. "I'm sorry I don't understand. You said you're looking for your mom. But if you know where she is, what's the problem?"

He wiped at a dripping nose with the back of his beefy hand. "It's like this. I know where she lives. Up at Twelve Witchtrot Road. The problem is, well, she's got a new fella. Mom's been on her own since dad dumped her a few years back and moved over to Vermont. And ever since she got this new fella living with her, Hank McCord is his name, I can't see her."

I held the money out back to him. "I'm sorry, George, I don't think I can help you. She's not missing. You know where she lives. That's something I can't do for you."

He shook his head. "No, you don't understand. I go to the house

and knock on the door, and Hank, he comes and answers. And he says that my mom doesn't want to see me, and he tells me I'd better leave, and if I don't leave, he'll call the cops on me . . . and that'll mean trouble, and I can't bear having trouble anymore."

Something about the phrase stuck with me, and I said, "What do you mean, you can't bear having any more trouble?"

George shifted his large feet and said, "When I was younger . . . I drank lots—lots and lots. A six-pack every day, a case every weekend. Raised a lot of hell and got into lots of trouble. Not proud of it, but that's what happened. And with a record like that, when Hank McCord tells me to beat it, I do just that. I don't want to get into any more trouble; I can't afford it."

"I see. And you've contacted the police chief and—"

George sighed. "He said it's just a family affair. That he has plenty of real police work to do. That I should stop bothering him."

Knowing Chief Bryant Hughes, who's about three weeks away from leaving Purmort for good and taking a nice cushy job with Homeland Security, that sounded just about right. No use in raising questions or problems during these last few weeks.

"This Hank McCord, what's he like?" I asked.

George said, "Young guy, about my age. Tall, strong, but slick, you know? Always dresses right. Antique dealer of some sort, which is why I think he took up with mom."

"Why's that?"

"Mom's a treasure hunter, that's why. Always collected stuff, stuff she told me she was going to leave me when she passed on." He gestured to the dump store. "Sometimes she found neat stuff here, and antiquing up and down the valley. She keeps her really important stuff in her safe. Not a big secret, but that's what she's done."

He wiped at his eyes again. "That's . . . that's why I think Hank took up with her. To woo her, get her confidence. So she'd turn all her treasure over to him, and then he'd dump her. I don't want that to happen. I need to talk to mom, to work things out. You know?"

"Sure," I said. "I know." I looked at the wad of bills in my hand, thought about what he was asking, thinking that maybe an hour would work, maybe not, and then again, why should I bother? Most of my work is straight investigative stuff, working for insurance adjusters, getting copies of motor vehicle accident reports or workers' compensation claims. Not especially exciting, but stuff that paid the light bill and cable bill every month.

I looked up at George, at his bearded face, and thought of something else. My cat Roscoe. Pathetic, huh? Single female latching

onto her male companion. But there was something else there. I thought about how Roscoe had come into my life, wandering into the yard with an infection that would result in a plume of mucus out of his nose every time the scrawny cat sneezed, and how the vet would only examine him if I agreed to adopt him, which I did.

"All right, George," I said. "Come over to my car, we'll do a little paperwork. I'll find your mom, tell her that you want to talk to her. Okay?"

He nodded so quickly and enthusiastically, I thought he might get whiplash. "Sure. That'd be great. Thanks a lot. I mean it. Thanks a lot."

And as we went to our respective vehicles, I was instantly having second thoughts.

Roscoe and George.

I'm a sucker for furry faces.

Next day I was on Witchtrot Road, in the adjacent woods, looking at number twelve through a spotting scope I had set up on a little ridge of land. The biggest difference in doing P.I. work in the countryside versus the city: In the city, there are plenty of places to hide to do your work. Out here in the countryside, where neighbors keep a view on neighbors, and when everyone keeps an eye on the roads, there's no such thing as a good hiding place. There are just places where you can go for a while to do your job, which is what I was doing. I was fortunate in that it was a nice sunny day, but after about a half hour, I was bored out of my skull.

I had a campstool and a bottle of water, and the spotting scope allowed me to keep an eye on the place without too much effort. Earlier I had made a phone call from one of the few remaining pay phones in town at the Purmort General Store, which meant no record of me calling. A male voice had answered, then I had hung up. But so far, nothing much was going on at the residence. The place was a standard Cape Cod with peeling gray paint, an attached garage, and an outbuilding that was about one size too small to be called a barn. Two cars were parked in the dirt driveway, a Ford and a Toyota. Part of the yard was enclosed by a white picket fence. Not much, but it passed for what was considered homey in this part of the world.

I lifted my head up from scope, scratched at the base of my neck. I knew I was eating up my paid hour, but something seemed odd about the whole thing. I put my head back down to the spotting scope just as the door opened up and a man stepped out. One

Hank McCord, no doubt. He was dressed in nice slacks, black turtleneck sweater, and brown shoes, and he whistled as he went to the Ford. I thought I had a chance then, if he left the property, to rush down and see George's mom for myself, but no such luck. Hank retrieved a file folder from the front seat of the car, and still whistling, went back to the house.

I scratched at my neck again, thought of what George said. Mom collected treasures. Mom had taken up with an antiques dealer. Mom was no longer around to talk to George.

Around then it clicked, and creeped me out. I stayed for another hour—thereby working for free—and then I packed up my spotting scope and left.

Getting ahold of Chief Bryant proved to be a challenge, since due to an earlier incident involving me, his teenage daughter, and a few other things, we're no longer on speaking terms. But by Monday morning, back in my office, I called and asked him about George and his mom.

"Look, Karen, I'm about sixty seconds away from going into court, and I don't have time for this," he said, sighing.

"But George Pembroke said that he—"

"And do you know George Pembroke at all? Do you know about his drinking, and how when he drinks too much or too little, he either gets into fights, or imagines men from the government are trying to implant tracking chips in his butt?"

"No," I said, shifting the phone receiver from one hand to the other. "I didn't know that."

"So you don't know much," he said. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Chief, look, did you ever—"

"Sorry, Karen, the court system of Grafton County is calling me in. So long."

And that was that.

I next got a few minutes with Pam Dawkins, the town clerk of Purmort, and after a brief excursion into record-keeping land, where she verified that the Toyota I had seen was registered to one Hank McCord and the Ford was registered to one Alice Pembroke, I asked her about George and his mom.

"Alice? Alice Pembroke? Oh, there's someone for you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Pam settled down in one of the swivel chairs that were new to the Purmort Town Hall back when a certain president promised us peace with honor. She said, "Alice is a character, and so's her idiot son, George. Alice lives on disability, pinching pennies and

haunting bingo parlors and flea markets. Her hubbie bailed out on her a few years back, but I heard that she got some sharp lawyer to drop some accusations of wife abuse in his lap, and so he cut her a hefty check to settle things up. With that and everything else, she makes do."

"And George?"

Pam smiled. "Oh, he's not a bad sort. I guess I was too harsh when I said he was her idiot son. You know when they say someone's challenged because they got dropped on their head when they were a baby? George got dropped on his head on a regular basis. High school dropout, hard drinker, knows his way around a bulldozer and chain saw, but that's about it. Check in with the chief, you'll see he's got a hell of a record."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll consider that."

Pam's smile grew wider. "Chief still pissed at you?"

"You know it. Tell me, when was the last time you saw George's mom?"

"Hmm," she murmured, swiveling her chair to check on a desk calendar. "Let's see, that was about three or so weeks ago. Came in complaining about her property tax bill, as only Alice can do. All those years of drinking Seven-and-Seven and hanging out in bingo parlors gave her a voice that could rub off rust on steel."

"She look all right, then?"

"Cripes, yeah. So. Why all the questions? Why are you tracking down those DMV records? Working a case?"

I made to leave her office. "Of course I am. And Pam?"

"Yes?"

"The case is almost done. So please don't gossip about it until tomorrow?"

That brought a laugh, and she said, "You know me too well, dearie. All right, you've got until tomorrow."

I decided to go home for lunch, which brought out a loud and welcome response from Roscoe, who danced about my feet as I came in, jumped up on the counter and rubbed at my face when I bent down to talk to him, and who purred so loud that I was sure it would wake any napping neighbor.

All right, that was a lie.

I went in, Roscoe looked up from his patch of sunlight in the living room where he was working on his key early afternoon nap—not to be confused with the tactical late morning nap or the strategic late afternoon nap—and rose his head up, acknowledged that I was in fact home, not bearing any fish products, and then went back to sleep.

"Bad boy," I said. "I was going to make a tuna fish sandwich and let you lick the bowl clean, but you keep on napping. Don't want to disturb you."

So lunch was a peanut butter sandwich, eaten at the countertop while I looked through that day's copy of the Purmort *Daily*

I had no doubt when I left this cute little house I was going to report a murder. *Sun*—its motto, "Nobody Covers Purmort Like We Do," which is true, since no other newspaper within fifty miles cared about

Purmort. I found nothing much of interest.

I kept on thinking about George and his mom, and what might be going on out there on Witchtrot Road. Maybe another phone call. Maybe another bout of surveillance. Maybe—

A thump on the countertop, as Roscoe came up for a visit. The countertop was forbidden territory, but like I said, I was a sucker for bearded creatures, so I scratched behind his ears and said, "That's nice, Roscoe. The direct in-your-face approach. Why didn't I think of that?"

And I gave him a cat treat from a foil packet, which jump-started his purr engine, and went back to my office.

A few hours later, armed with forgeries, lies, and my revolver snug in a holster at the small of my back, I returned to Witchtrot Road. In my mind I kept on running through the patter I was going to try to see what happens.

From Witchtrot Road I made a right-hand turn into the driveway. Before me were the two parked cars, the house, and the small outbuilding. I parked my Ford and waited for a moment, thinking, and taking a couple of deep breaths. Dangerous? Not particularly.

I gathered up my belongings, forgeries included, and with my purse, which had a cell phone inside, I went up to the front door.

The cell phone was part of my grand plan, for as sad as the thought was, I had no doubt that when I left this cute little house out in the rural wilds of Purmort, I was going to call the Purmort police and report a murder.

In a way, I thought, as I went up the steps, George Pembroke was going to get a lot more for his eighty bucks, but I didn't think it was going to make much of a difference, one way or another.

Took another deep breath, knocked on the door.

Waited for the murderer to answer.

For it made sense, in a dark and awful way. The poor woman hadn't been seen in three weeks, her only son wasn't allowed to

visit, and she supposedly had a treasure, a treasure that no doubt tempted one Hank McCord. Good enough for motive in plenty of cases.

I didn't have to wait long.

Hank McCord answered the door, still wearing the turtleneck and slacks combo from the other day. His smile was as phony as a rebate check from the cable company, but it was late afternoon, so maybe he was just tired.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Hi," I said. "I'm looking for Alice Pembroke."

His smile didn't falter. "And you are . . . ?"

I took out a thin leather wallet, which held my official Department of Safety identification, and presented it to him. "My name's K. C. Dunbar. I'm a licensed private investigator, working out of Purmort."

Was that a hint of fear in his eyes? "And what is this in reference to?" he asked.

I said, "I'm sorry, that's a matter I do have to discuss with Mrs. Pembroke."

Now for sure the smile was faltering. "I'm her fiancé. You can tell me."

"I really need to speak to her privately."

His hand seemed to tighten his grip on the door. "And I'm afraid you're going to have to tell me first."

I paused, looked at him, and made a show of sighing and rolling my eyes. I dug into my shoulder bag and pulled out a business-sized envelope, with a return address emblazoned on it in bright blue ink, from Acme Consolidated Insurance and Technology Company. The little glassine window on the side showed a typed name and address, said name and address being that of Alice Pembroke of Purmort, N.H.

I made sure Hank saw the envelope and said, "I'm representing the Acme Consolidated Insurance and Technology Company. They have a check here for Mrs. Pembroke for five thousand dollars, and I need for her to sign a release before she can receive it."

His faltering smile was no longer faltering. He was grinning. "Really?"

"Really," I said.

He held out his hand. "Give it to me and I'll make sure she gets it."

I thought, Oh yeah, I'm sure about that, and I put on my best smile and said, "Sorry, sir. I need for her to sign the release form."

"Give me the check and release form, I'll make sure she signs it and mails it in."

Another shake of my head. "I'm afraid not. Company regulations are very strict and clear on this point. She needs to sign it in my presence."

That made him think, and then I thought of what was going to happen next, how I was going to push him to tell me where she might be, and why wasn't she here if both cars were in the driveway, and then I'd make the call and—

He turned and yelled out, "Honey! Could you come here for a moment?"

There was a murmur and then a female voice, and then a woman walked into view from the other side of the living room. She was a bit older than me. She was wearing comfortable jeans and a light gray sweatshirt, and her blond hair was cut short. She looked at me with curiosity, and Hank said, "Honey, this is K. C. Dunbar, a private investigator, working for an insurance company, Acme something or another. It seems they have a check for you, for five thousand dollars."

Her face lit up. "Really? Five thousand dollars? Whatever for?"

I looked at her and said, "You're Mrs. Pembroke? Mrs. Alice Pembroke?"

She nodded, smiled. "Yes, of course. And how in the world did I come to get a check for five thousand dollars?"

My feet were chilled and I felt stupid indeed. "It's . . . it's a settlement. That's what it is. For a claim made a number of years ago."

She looked to Hank. "But I don't recognize the name of the company, or being involved in something that would end up being a claim."

Hank laughed. "Hey, what the hell, it's still five thousand dollars, isn't it?"

I looked into the envelope, and then looked up and said, "Mrs. Pembroke?"

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Alice Xena Pembroke?"

She shook her head. "No. Alice Marie Pembroke. That's my name."

I put the envelope back into my bag, laughed and said, "What do you know? There must be some sort of mistake. You know how insurance companies are. I'll have to get back to you on this. My apologies for disturbing you both."

And then I stepped off the steps, went back to my Ford, feeling like a fool with every step.

But a determined fool, nonetheless.

I got into my Ford and backed down the driveway. Once out onto the road, I stopped and retrieved my cell phone, determined to make a phone call to the Purmort Police Department, because—

Well, damn.

No signal.

I felt like driving the cell phone into my forehead.

Despite all those funky television ads showing the depth and breadth of cell phone coverage from various carriers, large swaths of rural New England are still the Bermuda Triangle of communications.

I put the phone back into my shoulder bag. Thought: Schemed. Plotted.

For that woman back there, supposedly George's mother, walked with no difficulty, had a cheerful and pleasant voice, and might have been George's mother, if she had been able to give birth at age twelve or thereabouts.

Possible, but not probable.

I got my stuff together and went back into the woods.

I observed activity of a sort about the house, so I guess I had stirred something up. Sometimes that happens when you're working a case. So in that way, I was doing my job.

Doors were being slammed, voices raised, and then I saw Hank McCord come striding with purpose out of the house, heading for the small barn. I saw something metallic in his hands . . . and then it came to me.

Hank wasn't a murderer; he was just a kidnapper.

On his way to becoming a murderer.

I got up from my perch, grabbed my bag, and started running.

It took just a minute or two, but I was almost out of breath by the time I got to the yard. The bag was thumping on my side and my Ruger .357 revolver was in my hands as I ran into the open barn. Hank was on the other side of the barn, in front of a closed wooden door, and the something metallic was there. I yelled, "Hold it, right now!"

He turned as I said, "Drop what's in your hands or I'll shoot you, Hank. Don't push me!"

His face was drawn and white, like a pint of blood had suddenly pooled at his feet. He opened his hand and there was a clink as he dropped something.

I looked down.

A set of keys.

I walked closer, revolver held out in the approved two-handed stance. Hank started talking, and I said, "Shut up. Pick up the keys, Hank. Pick up the keys and unlock the door. Let's see what you're hiding."

His hands were shaking some as he went to the door, where a shiny new lock was hanging from a metal clasp. He undid the lock and opened the door a crack.

The door creaked and swung open, and Hank stepped to the side. There was enough light so that I could see the interior of the storage room, said interior holding some farm tools, a workbench, a huge metal safe, and an old woman, sitting in a chair, arms and legs bound with rope. I stepped closer and said, "Mrs. Pembroke?"

Her eyes opened up and her voice was raspy. "Who the hell are you?"

"K.C. Dunbar," I said. "I'm a private investigator. Your son George hired me."

She seemed to ponder that for a moment, and said, "That sorry sack of . . . no wonder it took so goddamn long for somebody to show up."

I looked over at Hank, and for some reason, he was smiling.

Then came the creak of wood, of someone stepping behind me, but I was too late.

Something heavy and fast struck at the base of my neck.

The next few minutes were dim and wobbly. I had fallen down with a thump, and my revolver was taken away from me. Then I was propped up, and I could see Hank and the other woman shouting at each other. My ears didn't seem to work so well, but it looked like they were blaming each other for the mess they were in: You never listen to me; This has gone on far enough; That old biddy is tougher than you think; What the hell are we going to do now?

And then the screaming started.

I closed my eyes and waited.

When I tried to get moving, someone was standing on one of my feet. I looked up and saw the real Alice Pembroke looking down at me, holding a pitchfork.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I've been better."

She cackled and spit on the floor. "That's the story of the day. My useless boy George really hire you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, late is better than never, I guess."

I wiped at my eyes, which were getting into focus. "What happened?"

She said, "What happened now, or what happened earlier?"

"Now," I said.

She cackled again. "Fools have kept me locked up for a couple of weeks. Thought they could break me, give up the combination to my safe, let my treasures go. Hah! They didn't know that when I was alone, I was working those ropes by sliding my chair in the corner. A scythe was there. Managed to get most of the ropes cut free when you showed up."

I closed my eyes and noticed a hell of a throbbing at the base of my neck. "Earlier? What happened earlier?"

"That clown Hank and his loose girlfriend, they heard about my treasure. Wanted to buy it. I told 'em no. They kept on pushin' and pushin' me, and they thought if they put me in that room I'd give up the combination, so they'd get my treasure and head off to Mexico or some damn place."

I managed to sit up without passing out. "Where . . . where are they now?"

She motioned with the pitchfork. "Both of 'em in the same place they kept me. Amazing how a pitchfork up the rear can make people move."

I said, "I can believe it."

In a short while the place was full of cops and investigators, and then George Pembroke showed up, crying and laughing and hugging his mother, who let her big boy pick her up and swirl her around the inside of the barn. Hank and his girlfriend—and I still didn't know her name—were taken care of by EMTs from the Purmort Volunteer Fire Department, who tried not to laugh as they bandaged up the wounds.

When things calmed down a bit, George brought his mom over and said, "Go ahead, show her."

"Show me what?" I asked.

"The treasure, the treasure Hank wanted so bad," George said. "I want to show you how you earned your money."

I was still feeling groggy, having been whacked upside of the head by the girlfriend carrying a length of firewood.

"Sure," I said. "Let's look at the treasure."

So George and his mom took me into the storage room, and mom got on her knees and deftly played with the safe's dial, and

when she had spun the it to her satisfaction, she tugged at the thick handle, and with a heavy click, opened the door.

"There," George said proudly. "There's mom's treasure. What do you think?"

I looked in at the safe, saw nestled in rows and rows, little sculptures of gnomes. Dozens and dozens of gnomes. I thought about what I had done, the eighty bucks I made, and I looked to the happy and content faces of George and his mom . . .

"Think?" I asked. "I think it's wonderful." 🐼

"Go find someone who can close me a perfect homicide."

"In this town perfect crimes just went the way of the duck-billed platypus and th' dinosaur."

"What did you do---replace the whole Department?"

"The guy you're looking for is already with the MPD. Haitian brother—a dude who can close homicide cases without even a clue."

◦ "What did you say his name was??"



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CODE BLACK

JOHN H. DIRCKX

The telephone in the doctors' lounge at Chalfont Hospital emitted a series of short sharp screeches. Rachel Noach opened her eyes to see cartoon figures chasing one another across the screen of the muted mural TV, glanced at the digital clock on the wall, which said 4:10, and picked up the phone.

"We have an adult male from a car crash, Doctor. Don't run."

Dr. Noach pushed some of the hair out of her eyes, pulled some of the wrinkles out of her scrubs, and headed for the emergency department ten steps away.

Two rubber-gloved paramedics were packing up their equipment in the corridor. In Treatment Area C, Nurse Walther was idling with a clipboard, a clear indication that the man on the gurney was beyond medical help.

He was African American, in his thirties, dressed casually, wearing a windbreaker appropriate for the early spring weather. Severe head wounds distorted his facial features, and his clothes were soaked and spattered with blood. A cardiac monitor showed only a flat line of tracing. "They say he had a pulse when they picked him up," said Ms. Walther.

Dr. Noach put on rubber gloves, checked the chest leads to make sure they were properly applied, felt the victim's neck for a pulse, shone a light into each of his lifeless eyes, pulled off the gloves.

One of the paramedics, who looked as if he should still be in high school, appeared in the doorway with a form. "Can I get you to sign off on him, Doctor?" he asked. "We've got another call."

The doctor scribbled a signature and returned the form. "Code black," she yawned. "We'll notify the coroner." She headed back toward the lounge, already half asleep again.

Ms. Walther caught the paramedic's look of indignation and reproach. "It's just slang," she said. "She means he was dead when first examined—no resuscitation efforts indicated. It's got nothing to do with his skin color."

She drew a curtain around Treatment Area C and went to the

telephone to report the death of Malabar Lewis to the coroner's office.

For the third time that morning, Cyrus Auburn measured a section of basement wall with a spring tape, looked at a stack of two-by-fours on the floor, and made a mental calculation, which a combination of intuition and experience warned him would eventually turn out to have a flaw in it somewhere.

As he began arranging pieces of lumber in order on the floor, his thoughts turned once again to his Uncle Talmadge. When he was ten years old he'd spent most of one summer on his uncle's farm in Alabama helping build henhouses and repair enclosures for other animals. The family troubles that had caused him to be lodged temporarily with his uncle had also put him into a deep depression, characterized by lots of crying and very little eating or sleeping.

"You got to ride it out, my man," Uncle Talmadge had told him, over and over again, "you just got to ride it out."

On several occasions since those dark days, Auburn had found the discipline of an absorbing task therapeutic. He consulted his drawings, stretched his measuring tape along a twelve-foot two-by-four, and began marking off sixteen-inch centers for wall studs.

The doorbell was ringing. Since Auburn wasn't usually home at ten o'clock on a weekday morning, he had no idea what to expect as he went upstairs to answer it. Somebody selling vacuum cleaners door to door? Offering a discount on lawn treatments if he signed up before the weeds started growing? A misdirected pizza delivery?

Peering through the window in his front door, he could see a man and woman on the porch. The woman was looking back over her shoulder as if to be sure their arrival wasn't observed. When Auburn opened the door on the security chain, she twitched abruptly around. "Sergeant Auburn?"

"That's right."

"Agent Thawl," she said, flashing an ID past the crack in the door so fast that Auburn couldn't read it: "Can we come in?"

"What's this about?" he asked, not very cordially.

The man leaned sideways so as to bring his heavy features into view, and Auburn saw that he was carrying an attaché case. "Your Lieutenant Savage referred us to you."

"Yes?"

"We understand you're on political suspension—accused of favoritism toward a black suspect and undue force in dealing with—"

"That's been in the papers for the past two weeks," Auburn told him, still less cordially than before. "And Internal Affairs is handling the inquiry."

The woman moved in line with the crack again. She was a tall angular blonde with a face like a Barbie doll and a voice like a chain saw. "Here's something that wasn't in the papers," she said. "When you were at the Police Academy you were turned down for undercover work because you, and I quote, 'dressed like a yuppie and talked like a Harvard Law professor.'"

Auburn took the chain off the door and stepped aside to let them in. He turned on lights in the living room and cleared newspapers and a bathrobe off the couch.

"Sit down, please. Would you mind showing me that ID again?"

She complied and Auburn learned that she was Agent Kristi Thawl of the Drug Enforcement Administration. As she sat down on the front edge of the sofa, her associate presented evidence that he was Agent Wade Wickham with the same organization.

They both refused coffee. "We're here in connection with a homicide that occurred last night in Hamburg Township," said Wickham. A big man in a blue serge suit, he looked as if he were ready to pose for the cover illustration of a book entitled *Your Federal Government in Action*. "A fellow named Malabar Lewis was murdered on Route 21 around three this morning."

"I heard something about that on the early news," said Auburn, "only they said he died in a one-car crash."

"Right. With three slugs in his head." Wickham had small eyes and a square face with fair, blotchy pink skin. From time to time as he spoke, a smile twitched briefly across his lips like a tic, but never awakened any answering flash of warmth or mirth in his eyes.

Agent Thawl had unbuttoned her blazer but still sat hunched forward in her seat as if she were waiting for a fire alarm to go off. "Lewis was a drug dealer in a pretty big way," she said, "and a very slippery character. We've never been able to find out anything about his connections or his sources. Whoever killed him probably knows all about that. But we don't investigate homicides."

"Well," said Auburn, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness, "neither do I when I'm on suspension—"

"Let me finish. Your Sergeant Moffat is handling the police investigation— Why are you smiling?"

"Have you met Moffat?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"Well, she isn't *my* Sergeant Moffat, that's all. She's a body-builder and a martial arts expert and she'd flatten me if I ever called her Sandy instead of Sandra. You were saying—?"

"Lewis was murdered about a quarter of a mile from a bar called the Teutonia Grotto. Ever been there?"

Auburn not only knew where it was but also immediately knew what they wanted and the reason why they had come to him. And he was confident that that reason would never be mentioned officially or otherwise by anyone involved in the operation.

Hamburg Township, now part of the city, had been founded in the nineteenth century by German immigrants whose descendants had long ago sold off their farms to developers and moved away. During the past two decades the district had gradually become more and more densely populated by African Americans.

The Teutonia Grotto was an old stone castle of a place on Route 21. It had been a roadhouse in the early automobile era, a speakeasy during Prohibition, and at other times in its long history a restaurant, a dance hall, a bingo parlor, and a fleabag hotel. Currently it was just a low dive. Like similarly isolated places in other suburban areas, it was under continuing surveillance by the Vice Squad and was the focus of recurring complaints about gambling, illicit drugs, and juvenile drinking.

"We want to know if Lewis was in there last night before he got killed," explained Wickham. "And who was with him, who he hung out with, who or where his contacts were, and especially—"

"So where has affirmative action got us?" Auburn interrupted. "Don't tell me you haven't got *any* black agents."

"None available on short notice," Thawl assured him, "and nobody who's familiar with this geographic area and the local crime scene. We figure Lewis was killed either by his supplier for holding out receipts or by a customer for not delivering straight goods. If you're willing to take this on—"

"My picture has been in the paper just about every day for the past two weeks," said Auburn, "not to mention TV."

She tipped her head back and examined Auburn critically. "Not dressed like that. How long has it been since you shaved?"

"I don't know. What day is this?"

"You'll do," said Wickham.

"When were you thinking of starting?"

Thawl looked at her wristwatch. "I hear they do soup and sandwiches at the Teutonia."

Auburn stood up.

She didn't. "Are you sure you want to do this? You're going to be swimming with sharks, you know. The guy that runs the Teutonia is Eight-Ball Zook. He did six years for armed robbery

back in the eighties. He's as rough as a wire brush. On the street, 'eight ball' means—"

"I know," said Auburn. "Cocaine mixed with speed."

"There's just one thing," said Wickham. "You *do* sort of talk like a professor. Do you suppose you could turn that off for a while?"

"Well, sho nuff, Mista Big, ah kin do dat."

"If you talk like that in the Teutonia," said Wickham, "you'll be the next stiff on the coroner's slab." He picked up his attaché case. "I'll need to see your driver's license and get your Social Security number. If you want to get paid."

"My wallet's in the bedroom," said Auburn, going for it.

But my badge and my revolver, he thought to himself, are downtown.

As things turned out, it was after two P.M. before Auburn was ready to go, by which time he'd had lunch (two sandwiches, no soup) at federal expense. From the telephone booth of the restaurant where the narcotics agents had taken him, he dialed the cell phone number of Nick Stamaty, the coroner's chief investigator.

"What can you tell me about Malabar Lewis, Nick?"

"Just about anything you want to know, including the shape his liver was in. I'm watching the autopsy right now. You back on the duty roster?"

"Yes and no. What's this about three slugs in his head?"

"Shot at point-blank range in the right temple. Probably twenty-two caliber, but they haven't got the slugs out yet."

"Shot by somebody in the car with him?"

"Possibly. But nobody walked away from that car."

"What did it hit?"

"One of the supports for the overpass where Route 21 goes under the interstate. Lewis left half his brains on the inside of the windshield. It looks like the killers stuck him in the driver's seat after he was dead—without buckling his seat belt—and then sent the car rolling." Stamaty fell silent for a moment. "How come you're asking me all this stuff? Don't you guys talk to each other anymore?"

"Thanks, Nick. It's not the homicide I'm working on," said Auburn, and rang off.

From the restaurant, agents Thawl and Wickham drove him to the empty parking lot of a church about a mile from the Teutonia Grotto. There, in the cargo compartment of a panel truck ostensibly belonging to the Continental Bakery, they found Sergeant Kestrel, evidence technician and director of the forensic lab for the Department of Public Safety. Kestrel fitted Auburn with a

compact microphone and transmitter and ran some tests while Auburn walked slowly away from the truck, discussing the weather with Agent Thawl.

Kestrel's manner seemed a little stuffier than usual. Maybe he thought he shouldn't have to work with a detective who was under suspension. Or maybe Auburn's appearance put him off—three days' growth of beard, a stainless steel neck chain, and a khaki fatigue jacket with frayed sleeves and a side pocket torn nearly away.

"I couldn't manage dreadlocks at short notice," Auburn told him. "And I clean forgot my do-rag."

Kestrel held an earphone to one ear while smoothing down the microphone under the tattered lapel of Auburn's jacket with his other hand. "Try not to let this get wet. And don't bump it if you can help it. We don't want any ruptured eardrums."

"Where will you be?"

"Someplace where you won't see us."

Wickham and Thawl were sitting up in the cab portion of the truck. "So what's my story?" Auburn asked them. "Who am I supposed to be? These folks aren't going to give away much to a stranger just because he happens to have a black face."

"Lieutenant Savage assured us," said Wickham, "that you're a fellow of unlimited resources."

"Sure. That's why I'm on suspension. What kind of drugs was Lewis dealing in?"

"You name it. Heroin, crack, speed—"

"Did he have any drugs in the car with him?"

"No drugs. Just a green tennis ball stuffed full of gravel through a knife slit."

"Aquarium pebbles," said Kestrel, with whom verbal precision was something of a mania.

It was 2:10 P.M. when Auburn started walking west along Route 21. The Teutonia Grotto sat back a considerable distance from the highway, surrounded by unkempt woods where some of the trees were just coming into leaf. With its freestone facade and gabled tile roof it looked like Hollywood's idea of an Alpine ski lodge. There were six cars in the parking lot.

Inside it was dark and chilly. The very large room to which the time-scarred oak front door gave admittance had been considerably abridged by a row of curtains, thick with dust and cobwebs, that hung along one side like a wall. The old-world charm of the interior was somewhat spoiled by the rap CD blasting through the sound system and the mingled aromas of fried onions and disinfectant that hung in the air like a November fog.

One elderly man hovered at the end of the bar in an advanced state of befuddlement. The other customers, eight in all, were seated at tables in morose little groups such as one usually finds in a bar in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. One group of three was playing cards. All conversation ceased when Auburn entered, and he could feel eight pairs of eyes on the back of his neck as he approached the bar.

The man behind the bar, head shaved and eye-patch adorned with a silver number 8, was unmistakably Solomon Eight-Ball Zook. He perched motionless on a high stool, both hands resting flat on the counter, his solitary eye raking restlessly back and forth in unceasing vigilance.

He fixed Auburn with an inquiring and vaguely hostile look.

"Double vodka."

Eight-Ball Zook didn't reveal, by so much as a change in the rhythm of his breathing, that he had heard anything until Auburn placed a ten dollar bill on the counter. Then he snapped and rubbed the bill, spirited it into a drawer, poured the vodka, and stared off into a distant corner as if daring Auburn to ask for change.

Auburn took his drink to a table near the huge stone fireplace. A fire fueled by newspaper, cardboard cartons, and what looked like the remnants of a wooden folding chair flickered fitfully on the hearth but shed no warmth. Glazed tiles above the carved mantelpiece bore heraldic emblems—lions rampant, dragons, a sword clenched in an armored fist, a menacing and imperious German eagle. Long-handled corn-popping baskets hung on the wall. The scent of stale smoke here contained an unmistakable tang of cannabis.

From somewhere beyond the wall of curtains a waitress appeared and moved among the tables, gathering up dirty glasses and paper napkins and pocketing tips. Her hair was red—as in tomato juice—and she was wearing spiked heels, wide-mesh stockings, and an apron the size of an airline ticket. Her high-octane jasmine scent easily vanquished all the other smells in the place as she brushed past Auburn to flick a twisted scrap of paper off the stone curb around the fireplace. "Musta been a *man* been cleanin' up 'roun' here," she said.

"Hey, baby," said Auburn, "you lookin' all cold an' blue 'roun' the lips. Maybe you oughta set by the fire an' warm up?"

She gave him a long, cool glance of appraisal. "You gon' buy me some antifreeze, honey?"

Auburn put a twenty on the table.

She sat down opposite him, took a sip of her drink, and looked at him more sharply over the rim of her glass. "Who you dentist?" she asked.

He knew at once that the whole operation had been a mistake and that his cover was now about as thin as the peel of a grape. "Spencer D'Arcy," he said. "You his helper, ain't you?"

"Hygienist," she nodded. "Was."

She took another sip and stood up. "'Scuse me a minute, honey."

Opposite the fireplace was a raised bandstand about eight feet square, dark and deserted at this hour except for a man who was puttering with speakers and microphones and from time to time manipulating the CD player. The waitress stepped across to the bandstand, spoke briefly to the man, and returned to Auburn's table.

The music stopped and the man spoke through a microphone. "Testing. Mickey Mouse is in the house. Testing."

Two customers who had been sitting at one of the tables rose abruptly and made a beeline for the front door as if they had just remembered leaving their cars outside with the engines running. The elderly man who had been hanging on the bar vanished into the men's room.

A rear entrance, whose existence Auburn hadn't even expected, opened with a crash and Sergeant Kestrel burst into the room with service revolver pointing heavenward. "Police!" he announced in a shattering tenor. "Everybody stay where you are. Keep both hands in sight."

As soon as his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, Kestrel advanced to Auburn's table and stood behind him like a guardian angel.

"What kind of game are you playing, Kestrel?" snorted Auburn.

"Your cover's blown." Kestrel stood with his back to the fireplace, sweeping the room with his watchful gaze. "Time to fade."

Auburn stayed where he was. "Will you get real and get out of my face? This isn't Public Safety's operation, it's the Feds'. And I'm in about as much danger in here as if I was at an ice cream social."

Kestrel retired in good order, looking slightly crestfallen but maintaining his vigilance to the end and not holstering his weapon until after he disappeared the way he had come. The music started again.

Eight-Ball Zook appeared at Auburn's elbow. "Man," he said in a deep growl that just barely made it out of his throat and through his teeth, "you some kinda Oreo."

He leaned forward with his hands flat on the table and his single eye showing a lot of white like a frightened horse. But Auburn thought it was probably a long time since Eight-Ball had been

frightened. "You come 'roun' here shuckin' and jivin' like a jack-leg brotha and you ain't nothin' but the Big Foe hissef."

Auburn shook his head. "Not this week. I done laid some cross words on the wrong honky, and the Big Man done hung me out to dry. And then—"

"I hear what you sayin'," gargled Zook. "But who this Mista Snow I jus' see in here wavin' a joint up in my face?"

Everybody in the place was waiting for the answer. "Will you listen here to me?" said Auburn. "They come 'roun' an' ast me would I hep find out who wasted Malabar Lewis."

"You mean B. F. Lewis, what crashed his car last night?"

"That's the man. You know him?"

Zook looked off into his favorite corner, just this side of infinity, and nodded.

"'Course I did."

"He in here last night?"

"If he was, I didn' see him."

"What kinda stuff he deal?"

"I don' know nuffin' 'bout no dealin'."

Auburn leaned closer. "Lewis, he dead and gone. Nuffin' you do gonna hurt him. If he—"

"Okay, now, you listen here to me, Mista Cop what got hung up to dry. Ain't nobody sell no drugs in this place, no time. And that the square bidness. Man, that would be ugly. And God don't like ugly."

He went back to the bar to serve customers, and the waitress reappeared at the fireside.

"You neva finish you drink," Auburn told her.

She picked up her glass without sitting down. "Dippin' 'roun' *this* place," she said, "could get you one upside the head."

"Yeah," agreed Auburn, fixing her with a hostile glare, "'special-ly when somebody in here drops on you."

She leaned over the stone curb around the fireplace, picked up the twisted piece of paper she had flipped inside it a few minutes earlier, and laid it on the table in front of Auburn.

"Honey," she said, "now you owe me. Big time."

"What this?"

She slapped his hand. "Don' you touch that. If you keep your eyes on Kaneesha's fingas instead of someplace else, you might notice Kaneesha use her finganails—"

"I ain' got no two-inch finganails."

"You *betta* not have no two-inch finganails."

She sat down at the table and held down a corner of the paper with one nail while Auburn untwisted the rest of it with the eraser end of a pencil so as not to add his prints to any that might

already be on it. It was a piece about three inches square; apparently torn from a notepad; and it bore the printed logo of Zerbat's House of Magic at Tunbridge Mall along with the phone number of the store. The only writing on it was a string of playing card symbols: 8 ♣ A ♣ K ♠ 7 ♥ K ♣ A ♣ 7 ♠ . . .

"Where this come from?"

"White dude. Set at that table ova there las' night." She pointed to a table even closer to the fireplace than Auburn's. "I see him throw that in the fire right before he lef', but he missed."

"He drunk?"

"He workin' on it. Put down three double whiskeys."

"He playin' cards?"

"No. Just chillin' out by hisself."

"A *white* dude."

"Uh-huh. I ast him did he have the jungle fever."

"You ast him *that*? What he say?"

"Nuffin'. Just give me the red eye."

"How long he here?"

"Come in about eleven, hung out till we close."

"What he look like?"

"Well, he wadn' no diesel like you, baby. Skinny little bone of a dude, with one them chin beards."

"How old?"

"Maybe thirty-five. Wearin' one them camouflage jacket with a hood. Button' right up to his neck."

"Ever see him before?"

"Nope." Kaneesha stood up and gestured vaguely toward the other tables. "Gotta drift."

Auburn found the bakery truck parked out in front, near the highway. Thawl and Wickham were strangely taciturn, and they had nothing whatever to say to Kestrel. But if Kestrel was abashed by his gaffe in trying to rescue Auburn from the jaws of death, he didn't let it show as he resumed possession of the microphone and transmitter.

"What did Lewis have on him besides that tennis ball full of pebbles?" asked Auburn.

Kestrel seemed less than enthusiastic about discussing evidence with a public safety officer not in good standing. "Just the usual junk," he said. "And a piece of scratch paper that said, 'Hazmat 3:30.'"

"Has which?"

"Hazmat. Hazardous materials. There's a sign up on the interstate, just outside the city limits, that gives an alternate route for vehicles carrying hazardous materials."

Auburn stepped out of the truck and shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked along Route 21. Clearly visible in the distance was the interstate overpass where Lewis's car had struck the concrete support.

"How far is that sign from here?"

Kestrel stepped down beside him and pointed. "You can see it right there to the left of the overpass."

"But Lewis's car was down here on Highway 21, right? It didn't flip off the interstate?"

"Correct. It did not."

"Anything else on that paper? Printed name or address?"

"No. It was a strip torn off the margin of a newspaper."

"Did Lewis have any playing cards on him or in the car?"

"What's with the playing cards? You asked that waitress about cards."

"Just an idea." As a private citizen, at least for the time being, Auburn felt no obligation to share any evidence he happened to have in his possession with a representative of the official force. "By the way," he said, "thanks for what you did in there. Sorry if I got kind of—"

"It's okay. Forget it."

The afternoon had been a learning experience for Auburn, if nothing else. David Kestrel—rigid, compulsive, aloof—had put his life on the line, or at least thought he was doing so, to protect a brother officer toward whom his feelings were lukewarm at best.

The federal agents dropped him back home around four o'clock with half-hearted expressions of gratitude. Maybe, thought Auburn, in the future they'd think twice about leaning so heavily on Public Safety for technical support and supplementary personnel.

Without changing clothes, he set out for Tunbridge Mall. Although he was under suspension, he hadn't yet been deprived of his car, which bore city plates. He left the car in a distant corner of the vast mall parking lot and walked a quarter of a mile in bright, breezy March afternoon weather to the north atrium.

He'd never set foot inside Zerbat's House of Magic, but the facade of the store was well familiar to him, particularly since he'd recently taken to watching late night TV. Every night at midnight, Channel 8 broadcast a two-minute "Witching Hour" news and weather spot from the north atrium. The spot was sponsored by the House of Magic and was shot live in front of the store, which was situated almost next door to the television studio.

The mall seethed with the usual late afternoon throng of shop-

pers, idlers, and adolescents just released from the bondage of school. Joining the swarm and allowing himself to be propelled along by it, Auburn gave the House of Magic a quick preliminary walk-by. Signs across the top of the front window announced the shop's stock in trade: TRICKS-GAMES-NOVELTIES-BOOKS-PARTY ITEMS. Displayed in the window was the usual merchandise of such establishments—sneeze powder and exploding cigars, vampire blood and chattering false teeth. An illuminated and animated clown mask changed unceasingly from a smile to a frown and back to a smile again.

Several playing cards, not of standard dimensions but from a deck of oversize stage cards, were strung out in seemingly random order across the bottom of the showcase. When he was well past the store Auburn consulted the slip of paper Kaneesha had given him and verified that the sequence of cards listed on it was exactly the sequence of the cards in the window.

Turning, he joined a stream of people moving in the opposite direction for a second walk past Zerbats. And then he noticed something he'd missed a minute earlier because of his absorption in the playing cards. The store next door to the House of Magic was Petownik's for Pets, and its front window display featured a huge tropical fish tank with a layer of smooth white pebbles at the bottom.

Auburn didn't venture into the House of Magic, but he loitered long enough outside this time to see a clerk, or perhaps the proprietor, demonstrating something to a customer. The clerk was wearing a sham tuxedo and a shiny black top hat rather than a camouflage jacket with a hood, but his skeletal physique and goat-tee beard fitted Kaneesha's description of the man who had hung around the Teutonia Grotto for several hours before Malabar Lewis's murder.

Auburn went home and after considerable searching found a deck of cards. His card-playing experience in recent years had been confined to games of Uno and Go Fish! with his niece and nephew. He had only the vaguest notions of the rules of games like poker, bridge, and euchre, and he had never played solitaire in his life.

It was almost beyond doubt that the arrangement of cards in the window of the magic store, which was broadcast to about twenty counties daily at midnight, conveyed some kind of message to those who understood the code. Auburn decided, without much hope of success, to try a simple substitution cipher first.

Supposing that the eight of clubs represented the eighth letter, H, then the ace should be A, and the king of spades should be the thirteenth letter, M. That at least was a word, if not a very prom-

ising one. But the seven of hearts should be G, and the next two letters were M and A.

It quickly dawned on him that using the number values of the cards could give only the first thirteen letters of the alphabet, but that any two suits combined would yield exactly the needed twenty-six numbers. Very little further experimentation was needed to show him that the black suits, clubs and spades, represented the first and second halves of the alphabet respectively. Thus the king of spades stood not for M but for Z, and the intended word was obviously "Hazmat," the word on the scrap of paper Lewis had in his pocket when he died.

In that case, the seven of hearts, and the deuce of hearts further along, must have been inserted as nulls to prevent the casual observer from noticing that the message consisted only of black cards. And the two treys of diamonds, followed by a joker, stood for three thirty, the time on Lewis's paper and near enough to the time at which he had been murdered.

Auburn had no doubt that any of a half dozen colleagues downtown would have looked up information for him that he couldn't access from home. But he didn't want to get anybody in trouble for revealing classified data to an officer under suspension. More importantly, as a matter of personal pride he was determined to solve this puzzle by his own resources.

He consulted the Better Business Bureau site on the Web. The entry for Zerbat's House of Magic listed, under Nature of Business, "Retail sales of novelty items, games, playing cards," and under Principals, "Mendel Petownik, Owner" and "Miko Zerbat, Manager." The store had been in business for four years and the bureau had processed no customer complaints during the preceding three-year reporting period.

The Nature of Business given for Petownik's for Pets was "Retail sales of domestic pets and tropical fish, pet feeds, health and grooming products, cages, aquariums and related equipment." Mendel Petownik was listed as the owner of this firm also. The pet store had been in business for nine years and the bureau had processed only a small volume of minor complaints from customers.

Further research at the computer told Auburn that Petownik was not only one of the owners of Tunbridge Mall but also heavily involved in other local retail and development projects. Zerbat belonged to a professional magicians' organization and put on magic shows and demonstrations of card tricks for small groups.

Auburn returned to his project of finishing the basement in hopes that the data on the murder of Malabar Lewis would somehow arrange themselves in his subconscious while he was mea-

suring and sawing and nailing. Such tactics had worked for him before. But by the time he knocked off work late that evening, he had collected only another Band-Aid on his right index finger and a throbbing welter of blood under his left thumbnail.

At midnight he watched, and taped, the Witching Hour news and weather spot on Channel 8. The cards in the display window of the House of Magic were arranged exactly as before. The clown face, though still lit up, had been stopped with its red rubber lips drawn down in a woeful frown.

Auburn passed the next few days in a muddy blur of amateur carpentry and wildly erratic eating and sleeping habits. But every night at midnight he studied the sequence of cards in the window of the magic shop. On the fourth night the cards were different. And the clown was smiling.

It took him a matter of seconds to decipher the message of the cards. "Skogstrom 2:45." This obviously referred to Skogstrom State Park, and more particularly to the sign on the interstate indicating the exit nearest to the park. But there was one sign for east-bound traffic and another for westbound, and they were probably about a mile apart.

Lewis's fatal rendezvous had been near where Route 21 passed under the interstate. Probably the hazmat sign was one of several markers for sites where one could approach the interstate on some lesser highway, or even on a country road, close enough to collect a weighted tennis ball tossed from a car on the interstate.

The interstate itself formed the southern boundary of the park, and the main access road ran parallel to it for half a mile. There were only private residences and farmsteads on the south side of the interstate. Inevitably, then, the Skogstrom sign meant by the message was the one for the westbound lanes of the interstate.

On the assumption that the intended time was again A.M. and that tonight was the night, Auburn had a sandwich and two cups of coffee before setting out a little after two o'clock for the contact point.

The night was dark and cold, with a hint of frost. A sliver of moon and, once he got away from the city lights, a sprinkling of stars showed that there was no cloud cover. As he neared his destination he began to reflect on the fact that Lewis had apparently been slain after keeping just such a rendezvous as this one, and that the man who had arranged the cards in the window was probably his killer. Had the clown been smiling that night?

Had the card message been a trap for Lewis? Wasn't it possible that tonight's message was a trap for Auburn? Kaneesha had passed the word to the patrons of the Teutonia that he was a cop,

even before Kestrel's one-man raid. Had she later told somebody else about showing him the paper with playing card symbols that Miko Zerbat had left by the fireplace? The night seemed suddenly colder despite the steady flow of warm air from the heater. He sorely missed the familiar weight of his service revolver against the left side of his chest.

Traffic on the interstate was moderately heavy at two thirty A.M., but there were few big trucks, and even fewer vehicles in the slow lane. As Auburn passed the sign saying SKOGSTROM STATE PARK NEXT RIGHT he saw no cars stopped either on the shoulder or on the access road that paralleled the highway here, separated from it only by a five-foot wire fence. He took the exit, crossed over to the eastbound lane, backtracked to the next interchange, and headed west once again on the interstate. His dashboard clock said two forty when he pulled off on the right shoulder about three hundred yards short of the park sign and killed his lights.

After waiting for a lull in the flow of traffic, he slipped out of the car and crouched down on its right side where the lights of passing cars couldn't pick him up. With a fervent prayer that a state trooper wouldn't happen along in the next few minutes with nothing better to do than investigate a vehicle abandoned on the shoulder, he settled himself to await developments.

The air near the ground was damp and chilly, and each passing car sent a cold wind sweeping under Auburn's car to scatter pebbles and throw another shiver up his spine. Even the slower cars were doing more than sixty, and from his point of vantage—or disadvantage—they seemed to be shooting past like rockets. Or bullets.

At precisely two forty-five a car traveling in the right lane whipped past Auburn's position and pulled to a stop on the shoulder just opposite the park sign. As nearly as Auburn could tell by the uncertain and shifting light, the driver was alone in the car. Without switching off his headlights the driver leaned across the front passenger's seat and skillfully tossed two objects, one at a time, out the right front window of the car and over the wire fence into the darkness of the park access road. Auburn would have wagered a week's salary that they were green tennis balls.

The stopped car pulled back into the right lane and accelerated with a roar that was audible even at this distance in the frosty air. Before it had gone a quarter of a mile, Auburn was following it just closely enough for him to keep the distinctive pattern of the taillights in sight. Stifling the impulse to call in the car's registration number to headquarters for identification, he committed it to memory along with the make and model.

Even while clambering back into his own car and setting off in

pursuit, Auburn had scanned the area where the tennis balls had landed without seeing a vehicle on the park road, much less anyone on foot. And that was exactly what he might have expected to see if this was a trap laid for him. But instead of waiting at the delivery point, as Lewis had done, Auburn had gone off after the man who made the delivery. Had they perhaps foreseen that he would do exactly that?

The car he was following was in the far left lane now, crowding seventy-five as it approached town. The traffic was a bit heavier here in spite of the hour, and Auburn drew in closer. Without any slackening of speed, his quarry shot past all the downtown interchanges. Auburn fell back again slightly when he noted, with quiet satisfaction, that the car had swung into the right lane as it approached the Arcadia Boulevard exit just west of town. This strengthened his conviction that the man in the car ahead was Milo Zerbat. According to the phone book, Zerbat lived about a mile north of here on Canfield Court in a suburban residential development partly owned by Mendel Petownik.

But after getting off the interstate, the car went south on Arcadia instead of heading for Canfield Court. Here Auburn proceeded with much greater caution. Since the city streets were virtually deserted, close pursuit for more than a few blocks would be only too evident to the pursued. Maybe that was exactly the idea. But instead of taking a circuitous route as if to foil or expose a follower, the car proceeded straight to a corner gas station, closed at this hour, and stopped opposite a public phone.

Auburn rolled by without slowing, made three quick right turns, and pulled into the gas station just as a man wearing a chin beard and a camouflage hunting jacket stepped up to the pay phone. Auburn parked so as to block the other car and was halfway out of his own car before Zerbat became fully aware of his presence.

"Hold it right there, Mr. Zerbat," he said. "Police officer. Please put your hands on top of your head."

Undoubtedly it was rash behavior for an unarmed man without official standing. But exasperation over his prolonged and wholly undeserved suspension had made Auburn reckless. Zerbat jumped like a frightened rabbit, started to obey Auburn's order, and then stared at him more sharply in the unearthly glare shed by a mercury vapor streetlight half a block away.

After the fiasco at the Teutonia, Auburn's self respect had begun to reassert itself. He had shaved that morning. "I know you," said Zerbat with a sneer, lowering his hands again. "You aren't any police officer. Not anymore. You got canned. Man, you are hot chocolate."

Auburn stepped in closer, trapping Zerbat between his car and

the phone booth, watching his hands closely—hands trained to do tricks. “You’re under arrest,” he said. “Put your hands on top of your head.”

Zerbat put his hands on his hips. “So show me a badge.”

“I don’t need a badge to make a citizen’s arrest.” Auburn had now backed Zerbat tightly into a corner, crowding his movements. “Your lawyer will explain all that to you.”

“What’s the charge?”

“The murder of Malabar Lewis.”

Zerbat’s air of bravado started to crumble. “The paper said he died in a car accident.”

“But you know better, don’t you? Get those hands up and turn around to face the car.” Zerbat could see for himself that, if it came to a scuffle, Auburn had three inches and thirty pounds on him. And maybe rage and frustration had lent Auburn’s voice a dangerous edge.

Zerbat complied. “You planning to knock me around like you did that guy at the fish fry the other week?”

Auburn patted him down with practiced hands. “I didn’t knock anybody around,” he said. “I put my hand on his chest because he was disturbing the peace and endangering another citizen. If it’s any of your business. Okay, you can turn around again. Keep your hands up.”

“Hey. I’m not going down for any murder. What makes you think—”

“Keep them up, remember? Your lawyer will have access to all the evidence before you come to trial.”

“How about we cut a deal right here and now?”

“I can’t make any deals.”

“But you can tell the city prosecutor that I cooperated.” Zerbat seemed to be regaining his self confidence. Unable to gesture with his hands, he jabbed his chin beard forward arrogantly.

Auburn, still not sure he hadn’t fallen into a trap, glanced anxiously up and down the dark streets. “I haven’t seen much cooperation so far,” he said.

“Well, then, how about this? I finger the guy that killed Lewis, you let me walk.”

“I’m listening. But no promises.”

“It was my uncle. He killed Lewis—he faked the wreck.”

“With how much help from you?”

“I’m not saying anything about that.”

“So who’s your uncle?”

“Mendel Petownik. He owns a pet store—”

“And also your House of Magic. And a chunk of Tunbridge Mall. And a chunk of your house. Who tossed that tennis ball to Lewis?”

"I did. Okay, I admit that. I threw the ball. But my uncle was waiting for him down on Route 21, and—"

"Keep the hands up there, remember? Are you sure it wasn't the other way around? Like maybe Uncle Mendel threw the ball, and you did the shooting? After hanging around the black bar up the highway for a couple hours, getting up your courage with bourbon?"

Zerbat fell silent, seemingly wondering whether he should say more or whether he had already said too much.

"Lewis just got pebbles," said Auburn. "What was in those balls you tossed tonight, out by the park road?"

Was it the eerie lighting here, or was Zerbat's complexion looking more and more all the time like the filling of a key lime pie? "Okay, that's it," he said. "I'm not talking any more till I see my lawyer."

Auburn took out a quarter. "You can call him from right here, just as soon as I phone in for some backup. I'll even let you use my quarter, because I'm going to get it back." He dropped the quarter in the slot and punched buttons.

"A cop calls 911 for backup?"

"A suspended cop does, when he's dealing with somebody as dangerous as you."

"You're flipping right I'm dangerous." Zerbat's whole frame twitched with sudden energy as he made his move. Ducking sideways, he reached back into the hood of his jacket with his right hand.

"Looking for this?" asked Auburn.

He held a handgun under Zerbat's nose, a .22 caliber target pistol with an eight-round swing-out cylinder and grips of cheap plastic that looked like congealed marmalade in the garish half light. Most of the long barrel had been sawed off, leaving a stump about two inches long to spew out slugs. That ruined it for target practice and even made it pretty unreliable as a homicidal weapon except at point-blank range. But, on the other hand, it fit quite easily into a pants pocket—or the hood of a hunting jacket.

"Maybe you better stick to pulling rabbits out of hats," said Auburn. "Ma Mammy didn't raise no stupid pickaninnies."

Zerbat clenched his teeth and let loose a violent string of profanity as Auburn, pistol in one hand and phone receiver in the other, identified himself to the emergency dispatcher and outlined the situation.

"For the last time," he said, after hanging up, "will you get your hands back on top of your head? I'm cold, I'm tired, and I'm already up to my neck in trouble downtown. Don't give me any more reasons to get careless with this thing."



The next afternoon Auburn, still under suspension, kept an appointment with the city prosecutor to give a sworn deposition in the case against Milo Zerbato. Zerbato, now behind bars and thoroughly alarmed, had been singing his head off. He had already spilled most of the beans the night before, when he thought the pistol was still in his possession and that before sunrise Auburn would be as dead as Malabar Lewis.

Insisting that his uncle had been the driving force and he himself only an unwilling tool, he told all about Petownik's drug business—how Petownik imported heroin concealed in packaging material with tropical fish that came in from Thailand. How he distributed it to a team of local pushers, including Lewis, by tossing it from a car on the interstate at any of twenty distribution points. How deliveries were made in tennis balls weighted with pebbles, the time and place being broadcast, by means of the playing card cipher, on the witching hour news and weather spot. And how Lewis had fallen foul of Petownik by double-dealing and been marked down for murder.

Zerbato steadfastly maintained that his Uncle Mendel had shot Lewis. But it was Zerbato, and not Petownik, who had had the murder weapon in his possession and whose right hand still bore traces of powder residue almost a week after the murder.

As he left the prosecutor's office Auburn ran into Kaneesha, minus the tomato juice-colored wig. She was there to make a deposition regarding Zerbato's presence at the Teutonia Grotto just before the murder of Lewis, and also regarding the slip of paper with the cipher message. Auburn had handed over the paper to Sergeant Moffat, who was in charge of the homicide investigation, and she in turn had passed it on to Kestrel in the lab. Kaneesha complained about having had to be fingerprinted by Kestrel.

"I ain' *neva* had that done before," she said as she wiped a few remaining traces of ink from her fingers with a facial tissue. "And that man got cold hands. You got cold hands?"

"You tell me." He switched his briefcase to his left hand and offered his right for testing.

"Why, honey, you ain' nuffin' but a walkin' first-aid kit. What you been doin', stringin' bob-wire?"

"Tryin' to finish my basement."

"You a carpenter too?"

"It better than layin' up in the bed watchin' reruns of *The Jeffersons*, but it ain' my favorite thing."

"And what your favorite thing?"

Auburn thought for only a moment before answering, "Prob'ly gals who ask questions like that." ♣

MIND GAME

BEN REHDER

Danny Ray Watts came to see me late on a Friday afternoon, and his clothes were covered with grease and sweat, so I figured he must've come straight from the auto shop where he works. Now, Danny Ray is a big old boy, and we've had some trouble with him since he got back home—mostly drunk and disorderly—so some of the deputies looked a tad tense when he made his way back to my office. First time he'd ever shown up here of his own volition.

He stopped in my open doorway and said, "Word with you, Sheriff?"

I waved him in. He sat in one of the two chairs in front of my desk, and I was wondering if it might break into kindling under him. He had a crew cut and his head was nearly as big as a bowling ball. "What can I do for you?"

"Got a question. About the law."

I studied him, but Danny Ray didn't look angry or upset or anything at all. His face was blank as a stone. "Let's hear it."

He said, "I been wondering about something. What's the difference between attempted murder and just plain old assault? How do y'all decide which one to charge somebody with?"

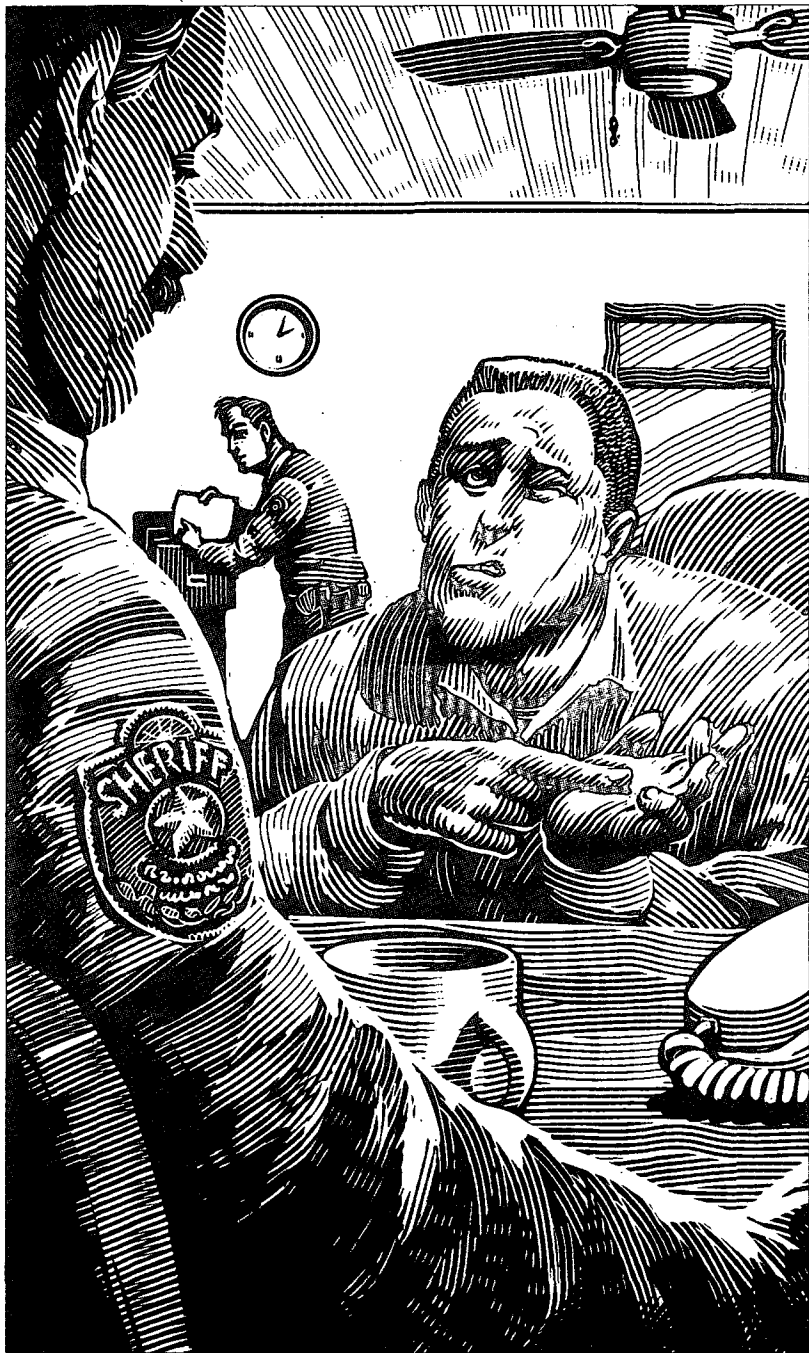
Right from the start, considering recent events, I didn't like where this was headed. I'd hate to see a boy his age throw his life away. "This a joke, son?"

"No, sir. Just an honest question."

"You got something planned, Danny Ray?"

"Oh no, sir. Not at all. Nothing like that. I'm just curious, is all. 'Cause it's confusing, you know? Like, if one man went after another man with a tire tool, but he only hit him in the legs, would you be able to charge him with attempted murder? I mean, if all he did was bust this guy's knees up real good, maybe put him in the hospital for a few months until he could walk again, but there wasn't no chance of the guy dying, they couldn't call that attempted murder, could they?"

I leaned forward slowly and put both elbows on my desk. "I'm



Tim Foley

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only gonna say this once. You stay the hell away from Frank Landrum. You got me?"

Danny Ray's expression didn't change one iota. He didn't utter a word.

"You got me?"

Billy Donovan, one of my deputies, was watching closely from out in the bullpen.

"I got you, Sheriff. But you didn't answer my question."

"You just stay away from Frank Landrum. That way, ain't nobody has to be charged with nothing."

Of course, after that, I was obligated to drive out to Frank Landrum's house and talk to him about the situation. Landrum owns one of the biggest homes in Blanco County, sitting on some nice acreage with a creek running through it and a herd of Hereford cattle resting in the sun. How a man got set up like that selling mobile homes I'll never know. Guess there's a difference between selling the homes and owning the entire outfit.

When I pulled up, the sun was just starting to sink behind the hills and he was sitting on his front porch drinking a cold one. No sign of Carol Ann, which would make this discussion a lot more comfortable.

I got out of my cruiser and Landrum said, "Hey there, Bobby. What brings you out?"

He still calls me Bobby, rather than Sheriff, because we've known each other since grade school. Not that we're close, because we're not.

I walked up to the porch and put both hands on the rail. "Danny Ray came by my office a while ago."

I watched his face get tight. "Oh yeah? What'd he want?"

I didn't see any sense in dragging things out, so I just related the entire conversation to him. Tire tool, busted knees, the whole thing.

When I was done, Landrum said, "That's a damn threat, that's what that is. Plain as day. What you gonna do about it?"

"Ain't much I can do, Frank. All he did was ask a hypothetical question. Never said he was intending to do anything. Never even mentioned your name."

"Well, that's just great."

"I figured I ought to tell you, though."

"That's just great."

"A man like Danny Ray, you can never tell."

Landrum stood up, and now he was pacing the porch. "Jesus, don't I got any rights? He comes and practically tells you he's

gonna break my legs, and you can't do nothing?"

"Not 'less he acts on it."

He threw his beer bottle past me into the yard, where it shattered against a rock. "This is about Carol Ann. Stubborn sumbitch can't let her go."

I stood quietly. Carol Ann Simmons had been the root of some serious trouble in Blanco County ever since she came of age, looking the way she does. And acting the way she does.

"Hell, she made the choice on her own," Landrum said. "Better man won, and that's all there is to it."

I didn't point out that it wasn't exactly a fair fight, since Landrum had been cheating with Carol Ann while Danny Ray was serving his country in Iraq. Wasn't my place to offer an opinion on that. I also didn't mention that I wouldn't blame Danny Ray if he broke Landrum over his thigh like a rotten two-by-four.

Now Landrum turned and pointed a finger at me, as if he'd just remembered something. "I got the right to defend myself. That's the law. If that young punk comes after me, I'll do what I gotta do. I'm telling you that right now."

I knew that Landrum, like most of the folks in this county, owned his fair share of guns. I didn't say anything for a few seconds, and Landrum finally dropped his finger. Then I said, "If he shows up out here, it'd be best if you'd just lock the doors and call it in. Let us handle it."

Landrum snorted. "Like you've handled it so far?"

Two weeks passed, and we never did get a call. No sign of Landrum either. He usually came into town almost every night to eat dinner, or on the weekends to go honky-tonking with Carol Ann because she loves her nightlife. But we didn't see his face for a good while. Word was he was holed up, and I figured that was pretty smart.

On the way to the department each morning, I'd drive by the auto shop, and more often than not, Danny Ray would smile and wave at me through the open bay door.

Finally, into the third week, I saw Frank Landrum's truck outside the diner during the noon hour. Later I heard that Carol Ann had walked over from the real estate office where she works to meet him for lunch.

Coincidence or not, Danny Ray showed up at my office again late that afternoon.

"Got another question for you," he said. He was sitting in the same chair. Maybe even wearing the same clothes.

"Don't think I want to hear it."

That didn't stop him. "This might be out of your field of expertise, Sheriff, but I'm wondering how they tell the difference between a fire that was set and one that was accidental. Let's say a man's house burns plumb to the ground—how do they know what caused it? Can they sort through all the ashes and figure it out?"

"Danny Ray," I said, "you're about to get yourself into a world of trouble."

He looked puzzled, or maybe even a little hurt. "I'm just asking a question. That's all."

I tried to glare at him, but I don't think it put much fear in him. "Any man that gets convicted of arson is gonna go away for a long while, that's for sure. Hard time. Especially if it was a revenge type situation. We clear on that?"

"We're clear, Sheriff. But I think you misunderstood."

This time I spoke to our county prosecutor just to be certain, and he said there still wasn't anything we could do. Danny Ray was dancing around the issue, staying just this side of the law. You can't arrest a man for asking questions.

So it was back out to Landrum's place because, as the prosecutor told me, I'd be exposing the county to a potential lawsuit if I didn't tell Landrum about Danny Ray's second visit.

"That son of a bitch," Landrum said. "Now you can do something, right? He says he's gonna burn my house down!"

We were in his living room this time. It was a large space, the walls lined with dusty old deer mounts and cedar planking. It occurred to me that there'd be a lot of material to feed a fire. And there damn sure weren't any hydrants nearby. Not out here in the sticks.

"Your name never came up," I said. "Same as last time. He asked a question, that's all. Wasn't necessarily a threat to it."

Landrum's face was pink with anger. "Of course there's a threat to it! Why else would he come see you?"

I could hear someone banging around in the kitchen. Carol Ann, most likely, in there making dinner. Creating a lot more noise than was necessary, if you asked me.

"Just keep your eyes and ears open," I said. "That's my advice. And call us if you need us."

Landrum took a step closer and spoke softly but urgently. "Christ, I'm turning into a prisoner in my own house, Bobby. This situation's long past tolerable. Carol Ann's 'bout had enough. She ain't much of a homebody, know what I mean?"

Which was putting it mildly. Carol Ann could drink more than

any three Blanco County cedar-choppers put together. She'd danced on her share of tables, and it was a wonder she hadn't moved to Austin and turned pro. Then again, when you've got a sugar daddy like Frank Landrum, why bother?

"My hands are tied, Frank."

Landrum became a ghost again, coming into town occasionally for groceries, but that was about it. Then one afternoon he called me, excited, and said, "Jeremy Miller said Danny Ray was at the Exxon, filling up five cans of gas. Lot of people saw it too."

"And?"

"That's all you're gonna say?"

"I'm not sure what you want from me."

He replied with that old standby, and his voice was so loud I had to hold the phone away from my ear: "I pay your damn salary, you hear? Now I want you to do something about that boy! That's what I want!"

I waited a few seconds for him to calm down, then I said, "You got a lawyer, Frank?"

"What? Hell yeah, I got a lawyer. A couple of 'em. Why?"

"If either of your lawyers can tell me what law Danny Ray's breaking, I'd be happy to bring him in."

He slammed the phone down.

I guess he wanted to prove he wasn't scared because he drove in the next morning and made himself visible all over town. Stopped at the diner, the feed store, the post office.

I was waiting for Danny Ray this time, and he didn't disappoint. Showed up that very afternoon.

"Sheriff," he said, "is it a felony to shoot a man's cows? And if you shot the entire herd, would they file it as one crime, or one count for each cow?"

I stood up, closed my office door, then returned to my seat. "You've had your fun, Danny Ray. But enough is enough."

He gave me his poker face. "What're you talking about?"

"I know exactly what you're doing, and damn if it ain't working. Frank Landrum is a basket case, and Carol Ann's going stir crazy. Ain't that enough for you? Besides, you really think this is the way to win her back?"

I wish he would've given in because that would've been the end of it, but he didn't. He said, "Maybe a fellow should just shoot one cow at a time and see what happens."

I told Landrum about it, of course, and his reaction was about

what I expected. He shouted and hollered and threatened to take my job. I said he was welcome to it because I felt like a schoolmarm trying to separate two brats during recess.

Our local game warden came by the next day and said he saw Landrum parked in his lower pasture, guarding his cattle. The fool had been out there all night with a Q-Beam and a deer rifle.

Six days later, this soap opera reached its sorry conclusion, and I got a call out to Landrum's place. I drove over there, learned what had happened, then went directly to the auto shop.

Danny Ray saw me in the parking lot and came out to meet me. "Mornin', Sheriff." He was all smiles and good cheer.

"Danny Ray."

"Something I can do for you? Need an oil change?"

"Carol Ann moved to Dallas," I said. "And because of that, Frank Landrum killed himself. Stuck a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger."

I've never seen a smile evaporate so quick. Danny Ray looked puzzled, and he didn't say anything for the longest time.

"Satisfied with yourself?" I asked.

He brought his eyes up to mine. The man was in genuine pain. "Jesus, I didn't . . . I never meant . . ."

"What did you think would happen? You screw around with a man's life like that, how'd you think it would end?"

"Oh sweet Jesus."

"You might as well've shot him yourself. In fact, I'm gonna talk to the county attorney and see if we can't charge you for this. In my opinion, you murdered the man."

Danny Ray's eyes were getting wet now, and there was a fear in there that told me he was through with his games. Finally.

Unlike Danny Ray, I knew when to call it quits.

So I signaled Frank Landrum, and he came driving around the corner of the building. I wish I'd had a camera because Danny Ray went from confusion to relief to total joy in about three seconds. Frank Landrum was alive, and Danny Ray couldn't have been happier about it. He actually gave Landrum a hug when he got out of his truck.

It was a mean trick, I know, but I had to do it because the part about Carol Ann was true. When I learned she'd hightailed it, which was never Danny Ray's intent, I figured he'd be more hell-bent on revenge than ever. Landrum, for his part, had had his fill of Carol Ann and was ready to put this nasty business behind him. What I needed was something to keep Danny Ray in line for good.

So I reached into his own bag of tricks. Turned out he didn't mind. ♫

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MURDER IN THE HOLD

JOAN DRUETT

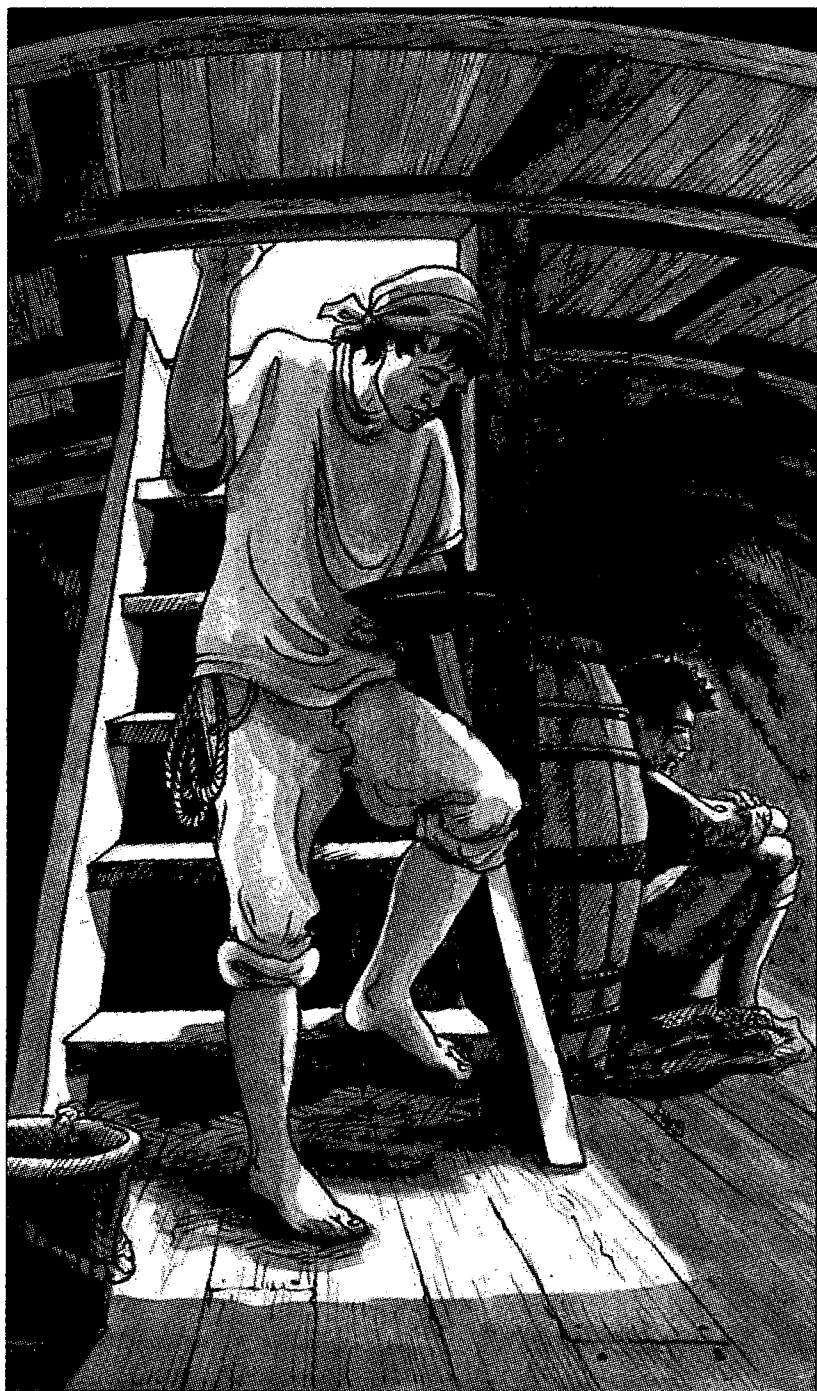
Captain Smith lifted his hat, scratched the top of his head, put the hat back again, then finally swiveled his chair to look directly at the lad he was about to charge with murder.

Smith was a Nantucketer to the bone. Like most whaling masters on board their ships at sea, he didn't look like a captain at all, being too young, too shabby, and too poor. His old brown suit was patched and stained in many places. He'd outgrown it since he bought it, or it had been made for another man, because the sagging waistband showed a portion of red flannel drawers, and there was a good margin of thick woolen sock between the hems of the trousers and his rough, sturdy shoes. To the eye of an outsider, the only sign of his calling, apart from his distinct stench of old oil, was the ring made of the tooth of a sperm whale, which fastened the rusty black neckerchief around his throat.

Those on board his ship were well aware, however, that Captain Smith was a real professional. He could spy a spout five miles away and tell what kind of whale it was in an instant. When in charge of the chase, he could direct four whaleboats unerringly to the prey; he was famous for his courage and the efficient thrust of his lance. He had shipped first at the age of fourteen, and had the brawny round shoulders of a man who had spent countless hours heaving at an oar. His little blue eyes had the unfocused, pale stare of a man who was accustomed to studying the far horizon.

Taken altogether, he was the typical figure of a young man who had risen from the forecastle to the cabin in recommended Nantucket style, with a fine career ahead of him, given luck in the way of catching whales. Right now, though, he was uncomfortable and unhappy.

Not for the first time he wished he'd never signed up for this confounded voyage. When Smith had first boarded the *Paths of Duty* in Nantucket five months earlier, it had been as first officer, a busy and important job because he was the second-in-charge,



but with the comfort of knowing that another man was going to make all the crucial decisions. First one captain and then his replacement had dropped dead, propelling him into the command, and various other deaths, mostly violent, had marked the voyage since then. There

There had been too much death altogether on the *Paths of Duty*, most of it connected in some way with the young savage.

had been too much death altogether on the old *Paths of Duty*, most of it connected in some way with the young savage who stood before him.

The trouble was that the savage, though young, was the most promising seaman in the forecabin, and he was going to be very sorry to lose him. The thought made him feel angrier than ever. He barked, "Have you any notion what trouble you're in, boy?"

Having become tired of waiting for the skipper to speak, Wiki Coffin had been surreptitiously studying the captain's cabin. It was unfamiliar territory, as he was the youngest of the twenty-seven men of the crew, and far too inferior to be invited into these quarters. In fact, the closest he had been to it was on the day he had shipped in Nantucket, when he had signed his name on the ship's articles in the officers' messroom, on the other side of the door. This, the private domain of the captain, was an important place, being the drawing room where visitors were received; it was the office, the chartroom, and the supreme court of the ship, where offenders were summoned for trial and punishment. However, it was not nearly as magnificent as Wiki had expected, being nothing more than a narrow corridor that ran across the transom. A great chart desk was crammed against the forward bulkhead, and a heavy settee thrust under the three little portholes in the stern, leaving very little room for the captain, who was leaning back in his chair. The captain's brother, the first officer—who was called "Mr. Starbuck" to avoid confusion—was slouched on the settee.

Both men, Wiki noted now, were staring at him with deep disappointment mingled with condemnation writ all over their mahogany-tanned faces. Up until this moment, he'd assumed he had been summoned to describe his discovery of the murdered corpse of Alfonso Gomes, but now it looked very much as if he'd been called aft for trial and punishment. But, if so, punishment for what?

Wiki shifted uneasily under the double stare, searching his conscience. Had they found out somehow that he had considered jumping ship? But, if so, he was certainly not the only one.

Whalemen were paid in shares of the profits from whale oil, not in wages like ordinary seamen, and the old *Paths of Duty* had been so unlucky in the matter of catching whales that it was obvious to all that anyone who survived the voyage would leave the ship in a state of debt. In both forecastle and steerage the men had openly muttered about taking the traditional whaleman's way of getting quit of a bad bargain—by jumping ship at the first good chance.

That first good opportunity had come after the *Paths of Duty* had been brought aback by a sudden squall in the southern Atlantic. The old whaleship came out of it with the mainmast warped so badly that Captain Smith was forced to put into Rio de Janeiro for repairs, and over the three weeks in port, seven men had beaten a furtive retreat. One, understandably, had been the man whose trick at the helm it had been when the ship was caught aback, and who was flogged for his inattention. Even more unluckily for him, he had gotten drunk and boastful in a *taberna*, and the proprietor of the tavern had turned him in. The tavern owner had been given a reward of money by Captain Smith, and the deserter had been rewarded too, with another dozen lashes.

Three more had been caught in various ways, so that of the seven absconders only three men had made good their escape, these being the second mate and two harpooners, all of whom had been shipped in the Azores just a couple of months before. Having the advantage of being Portuguese, and indistinguishable from the locals, they had disappeared without trace. This had left Captain Smith with three berths to fill, which was the reason Alfonso had been shipped, along with his much older brother, Miguel. It was the first time either of the two Brazilians had been to sea on a proper ship, so they couldn't take the places of the officer or the two harpooners. However, even greenhands who couldn't comprehend a word of English were considered better than nothing.

Wiki thought now that he could have easily gotten away with deserting in Rio. Most of the populace was as black haired and brown skinned as he was, and he spoke fluent Portuguese, having learned it from an Azorean shipmate, so it would have been child's play to vanish into the alleys off the bustling market at Rua Ouvidor. However, he had decided to wait until the *Paths of Duty* had arrived in the Pacific. After his Salem shipmaster father had abandoned him in New England, he'd made up his mind to get back to his mother and his *whanau*—his folks—in New Zealand, and joining the crew of a whaler had seemed the best way to do it.

This morning, though, after discovering Alfonso's corpse, Wiki

had wondered if he had made the wrong decision when he'd opted not to desert—a feeling that was intensified by the expression on the captain's hard Nantucket face. Very cautiously, he said, "Sir?"

Captain Smith growled, "I've no choice but to put you in irons and take you back to Rio, and hand you over to the U. S. Consul—who will put you on board the first ship bound for the States, where you'll go on trial and swing for it, boy."

"Swing?"

"They'll hang you for *murder*, understand? It might be the regular thing for folks to club each other to death in the barbaric place you come from, boy, but in the United States murder's a capital crime."

Wiki cried, "Murder?"

"The foul murder of Alfonso Gomes! Why the hell else do you think you were summoned to this cabin, boy?"

Wiki winced, and then muttered, "I thought maybe the theft of the mirror?"

When the skipper had returned from his first jaunt on shore in Rio de Janeiro with a fancy gilt-edged mirror tucked under his arm, it had been considered an eccentricity. Then when he hung it up in the hurricane house which sheltered the stern, just beside the door that led down to the cabin, and was observed to check his appearance every time he came on deck, just about every foremast hand thought Captain Smith had gone quite mad. However, as always in the close confines of a crowded whaleship, the truth emerged. The third mate, who had accompanied the captain on his third trip into the city, confided to his boat's crew that their skipper had fallen in love.

The object of this sudden adoration was the daughter of the local ships' agent who organized the repair of the ship and a certain amount of reprovisioning. The agent got a hefty fee for this, and commission from the merchants who supplied the goods and services, too, which accounted for the warm welcome Captain Smith received from the agent's family. However, he had been fool enough to assume it was reciprocated affection. All the crew who weren't busy deserting had enjoyed the comical sight of their skipper preening before the mirror before he took his boat on shore, and when the agent and his wife and daughter had come on board, it had been even funnier to watch him bow and scrape in his best shore-going suit.

Wiki, who'd been as amused as the rest of them, had greatly admired the girl, who had a bouncing mass of midnight curls and

a knowing sparkle in her huge black eyes. At the same time, though, he hoped that the romance would fall through. Not only would Captain Smith's wedding to a Rio girl annoy the Nantucket owners of the ship, who much preferred their shipmasters to be safely married to sedate Nantucket women who would make sure their husbands brought the owners' property home, but if he dragged her away from the excitement of Rio de Janeiro, the lass would be very unhappy in staid Nantucket while her captain was off on four-year voyages.

There was no need to worry. Captain Smith's proposal of marriage was turned down—because the agent's daughter had her eye on a much better prospect, or so the third mate told his men. Wiki wondered now if the disappointment were the reason the captain had jumped to this terrible conclusion that he, Wiki, was responsible for Alfonso's brutal death. Or perhaps the skipper really had gone mad?

"Mirror?" Captain Smith exclaimed, looking baffled. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"That mirror you put up by the companionway door has vanished. It was there last night, but this morning it was gone. Someone's stolen it. Unless you took it down yourself," Wiki amended.

Obviously, that wasn't the case, because the captain said more blankly still, "My looking glass is gone?" Then he looked furious as the news sank in, perhaps because the mirror was the last memento of his doomed romance. He turned to his brother and snapped, "Get a search of the fo'c'sle underway the instant we have this murderer here safely under lock and key."

Murderer. Wiki was on the verge of panic. He backed off a step, protesting, "You can't believe that I'm guilty, sir, not when you've not even examined the case."

"What else can I damn well believe? Alfonso was in solitary confinement in the forehold for his crimes, and no one opened up the hatch before you did. It's obvious you're the fellow who killed him!"

"Alfonso was dead when I arrived in the hold!"

"But who else could have done it?" demanded the first mate, barging into the cross-examination. "A phantom? A ghost? It had to be you! The cook swears Alfonso was alive last night when he unlocked the hatch and went down into the hold with his supper. Then, when he came back topsides, he lowered the hatch and secured it tight, and I know it, because I checked the bolt myself. I could hear Alfonso hollering hell and damnation in Portugee, carryin' on like the mad dog he was, so we know for sure that he

was alive at the time. That hatch wasn't opened again until four-thirty this morning, at one bell in the morning watch—and the whole bloody crew can attest to it. You were the first man to draw the bolt and go down there—so you were the last to see him alive.”

“How can you be sure that no one went down in the night?”

“Because the men who were on watch can swear to it, boy!”

Wiki thought uneasily that this looked ominous indeed. There had been just an anchor watch kept—an officer and three men, four hours at a time—because the *Paths of Duty* was not out in the open sea, but moored in a secluded cove south of Cape Frio, while Captain Smith dickered with ranchholders on shore for the provisions that had been too expensive to buy in Rio de Janeiro. However, even though each watch had been short-manned, the deck had never once been deserted. Wiki himself had turned out for one of those four-hour watches, and he distinctly remembered how the square hatch was in plain view in the moonlight, with no concealing shadows. If someone had drawn the bolt and lifted the cover, it was certain that one of the watchkeepers would have seen him.

“I swear he was dead when I went down there,” he insisted. “The cook must have been the last man to see him alive.” Except for the killer, he thought.

“Do you have any witnesses to that?” Captain Smith queried.

“No, I was alone.”

“So why did you go down there at all?”

“The cook sent me with Alfonso’s breakfast.”

The captain nodded because that made sense. When Mr. Starbuck had found that Alfonso paid no attention to orders, even though the officers spoke as slowly and loudly as they could, he told Wiki to take care of him because Wiki spoke the Brazilian’s language.

“So what happened then?” he asked.

“There wasn’t any sound as I came down the ladder, and no movement either, so when I got down to the bottom I put the plate down on the deck to keep my hands free. I thought that he might be . . . hiding in ambush, ready to attack.”

Wiki shivered, remembering the dark shadows cast by the shaft of gray dawn light that filtered through one square porthole in the side of the forehold. The heavy beams of the deck hung low, and the place was suffocatingly close. It was not a nice place to be incarcerated, but the Brazilian had deserved it—he had been locked up because he was unpredictable and violent, and had drawn a knife during a fight with one of the crew.

"And after you found him?" the captain said. "What happened then?"

"Nothing happened—he was dead!" When he had spied the bundle of rags lying up against the side of the ship, directly under the source of that shaft of light, Wiki had known at once that Alfonso was dead. It had been a preternatural feeling.

"So you keep on saying," the first mate derided.

"But why would I want to kill him? I don't have any motive!"

"Because he *did* attack you," Mr. Starbuck theorized at once. "And you don't have any trouble standing up for yourself, or so I've noticed."

Mr. Starbuck was right. Wiki had stood up for himself several times this voyage, and because he was big and muscular he had won all the fights so far.

"And you must've been feeling mighty irritated with him already, on account of you were the one in charge of the useless soger," Mr. Starbuck went on, "soger" being a whaler's most contemptuous term possible for an incompetent seaman. "You was supposed to show him the ropes—on account of he didn't have any English, and you speak the vernacular. And one hell of a horrible job you made of it too. All you had to do was translate orders, but he didn't learn nothing."

"I did translate them!" Wiki protested, remembering how Alfonso, shambling about the deck or in the rigging, had paid no attention at all to his shouts in Portuguese. It had been very frustrating. Thinking back, there had been moments when he really had felt driven to the verge of murder. Then he added, "Until I realized he was deaf, that is."

Both men stared, and Captain Smith exclaimed, "Deaf?"

"Aye, sir. Stone deaf. Couldn't hear a sound."

"But no one knew he was deaf!"

Wiki felt surprised. "No one?"

Mr. Starbuck shook his head. "Nope. You should've reported it to me, boy."

"But, Miguel, his brother—"

"Nope, Miguel didn't tell no one neither. How could he, when he don't have any English?"

Wiki lapsed into silence because the first mate was right. Then he pointed out, "We didn't have any trouble with Miguel learning the ropes."

The captain and his brother looked at each other, and then Mr. Starbuck said, "A brighter specimen altogether. Older too. God knows what goes on inside his head when he's trying to work out what the orders mean, but he's a steady man who tries his best."

Wiki nodded. He'd found Miguel a dismal sort of character, apparently haunted by something in his past. However, unlike his brother, Miguel had certainly tried to do his best.

Wiki said, "He—Miguel—told me how Alfonso's hearing was lost. It was quite a yarn too."

"Yarn?"

"Alfonso was deafened by insects, he said."

"Insects?" the captain exclaimed.

"Aye. It happened when Alfonso was a child—about four or five, I think. Miguel is quite a few years older, and I got the impression that there wasn't any other family, so he was responsible for his little brother. He woke up one night to hear Alfonso screaming in agony, and when he grabbed him the child was tearing at his ears, and after a few frantic moments Miguel realized that insects had crawled inside them. He found a lamp and lit it, and tried to poke the insects out with wires and sticks, but by the time he got the bits out, Alfonso's eardrums were entirely eaten away."

"My God," said Captain Smith, looking revolted. "I ain't heard nothin' like it."

"I have," said Mr. Starbuck, who was not nearly as impressed. "A cockroach got into a shipmate's ear once when I was a boatsteerer on the old *Atlantic*. Was trying out blubber at the time, so we got some warm oil fresh from the cooling tank and poured it into his ear."

"And it worked?"

"The roach floated up fin out."

"Good idea, worth bearing in mind," approved Captain Smith.

"You was the one who thought of it?"

"Nope," his brother admitted. "But I sure reckon a little warm sperm oil would've saved Alfonso's hearing." He said to Wiki, "Was it roaches what chewed Alfonso's ears?"

Wiki shrugged. He didn't know.

"Something foreign and nasty, for sure," the captain decided, and then asked, "So that was why he was such a numbskull, huh?"

"It was more than that," Mr. Starbuck said, before Wiki had a chance to answer. "Alfonso was *nothin'* but trouble. It ain't no loss to this ship or the world that he's dead and done, for sure. But to murder him like that!"

"The back of his head was smashed in, right?" said the captain.

"Like an eggshell," said Mr. Starbuck, who had been on watch when Wiki had come flying out of the blubber room with the awful news, and had gone down to check on the corpse. He added meaningfully, "It was obvious it was a savage what done it."

Savage. *Dear God*, Wiki thought. He shifted from one broad

bare foot to the other, abruptly very conscious of his brown skin and the black hair that trickled to his shoulders, while the two Nantucketers studied him dispassionately.

Starbuck said, "I hear that Maori warriors kill with clubs in New Zealand."

"So where is the club?" Wiki asked.

The captain frowned. "What?"

"The weapon that killed him."

Captain Smith looked at Mr. Starbuck, who admitted, "He wasn't carrying nothing when he came tearing up the ladder to report he'd found Alfonso's corpse."

"He must have left it in the blubber room. Did you see it when you went down to check that Alfonso was dead?"

Mr. Starbuck thought a moment, and then shook his head.

"Has anyone been down there since?"

"Nope. I shut the hatch and bolted it, until the carpenter's made a coffin. No point in havin' something that grisly on deck."

"Right," said Captain Smith. Morale was bad enough on board, without having a corpse out in the open for men to brood over. It was a mercy that they were so close to shore and Alfonso could be buried decently in a coffin in a regular churchyard, because there was nothing like a burial at sea to cast a pall over a ship.

He stood up with decision, and said, "So let's go down and look. It should be easy to recognize the belaying pin or whatever else he used as a club by the blood and brains on the working end, I reckon."

Wiki was right behind the captain and Mr. Starbuck as they strode out of the shade of the hurricane house that sheltered the stern. The whaleship was anchored just a hundred yards from shore, so his ears were filled with the rhythmic thud of surf. Beyond the blinding white of the curving beach, a parched sward of grass led up to the ragged stone walls and ancient-looking buildings of a small village, while foothills beyond rose toward a blue and purple mountain range in various shades of dark green, interspersed with the occasional glossy emerald of a banana plantation. In the morning brightness, the colors were intense. The warm offshore breeze carried a resinous scent, and seagulls screamed as they swooped overhead.

The men on watch were clustered curiously about the foremast, and a muttering rose up as they saw that Wiki was with the captain and Mr. Starbuck. The third mate, who was in charge of the deck, hassled them off to their work. Then he approached

the captain, saying, "Sir, the cooper is complaining that the big maul has gone a-missing."

"Not again!" Captain Smith exclaimed, highly irritated. The topping maul, a heavy, double-headed hammer, was used for knocking pins out of certain chains, such as the cat-stopper, which kept the anchor in place on the forecastle-head. When he'd ordered the anchor let go when they'd arrived at this little cove, there had been an embarrassing hiatus and the old ship had damn near run aground because no one had been able to find the hammer to knock the anchor free. At the last critical second the cook had come running up with it—he'd been using it to break up big lumps of coal into smaller pieces to fit in the stove, and had inadvertently left it by the galley.

"Have you asked the cook?" Captain Smith demanded.

"Of course, sir. He used it again last night but swears he put it back."

"I don't believe the lying hound for an instant. Set up a search party with him at the head of it—and keep an eye out for my mirror too."

"Mirror?" said the third mate, looking very startled.

"Aye. It's gone from by the companionway door. Don't you have any eyes in your head?"

"Aye, sir," said the third mate hastily. He beat a swift retreat, and Wiki could hear him yelling at the cook as the captain and Mr. Starbuck hunkered down by the fore hatch.

Just as the first mate had testified, it was securely shut and bolted. The bolt gleamed in the sunshine. Despite its shiny appearance, it squealed as Mr. Starbuck drew it back, just the way it had screeched when Wiki had released it that morning. Then Wiki helped him slide the heavy wooden cover away. Sailorlike, they were careful to keep it right side upward, as it was very unlucky to turn a hatch cover bottom up.

A short, strong ladder led down into blackness. Wiki went first, moving slowly as his sight adjusted. The planks between the bottom of the ladder and the small square porthole in the side of the hull were empty. This forehold was used as the blubber room, where the fat was chopped up when the whales were cut in, and because they had caught no whales, it hadn't been used at all, but it still stank of rancid oil from previous voyages. There was a metallic smell, too, from the bulk of the big iron freshwater tank, which glistened faintly with condensation. Forward, there was a pile of kindling for the cook's fire, all of it too fragile to be used as a weapon. Otherwise there was nothing but the corpse, the breakfast plate where Wiki had left it,

and the mattress that Alfonso had been given to lie on while he was imprisoned.

Captain Smith jumped off the bottom rung of the ladder with an echoing thump of boots, took one penetrating look around, then strode over to the corpse, which lay in the same huddled position, right under the sidelight where Wiki had found it. Without the slightest sign of a wince, he hauled it up and around so he could inspect the head in the light let in by the porthole. Then he hollered to his brother to fetch a lamp.

A lantern was duly fetched, and the bloodied head was turned from one side to the other while the two brothers peered and probed. To Wiki's disbelief, the victim's ears interested them a lot more than the crushed state of the skull. However, try as hard as they could, they couldn't look deep enough to see the intriguingly insect-chewed eardrums.

Giving up this absorbing pursuit, they turned to the job they had come down for, the search for a weapon. Listening to them throwing kindling around in the fruitless hunt, Wiki thrust his head outside the square sidelight, craning as far as he could before his shoulders stopped him. The bright broken reflections of the sun on the surface of the clear water were blinding for a moment, but then his eyes focused, and he could see down through the sea to the sandy bottom, marked with wavering shadows. Because of the delay when they'd come to anchor, they were almost in the shallows, and that, with the clarity of the water, created a tunnel effect that was so eerie he almost fancied he was falling. Then Wiki jumped with fright as Captain Smith spoke loudly from right behind his shoulder.

He brought his head in and turned. The captain said, "So that's what you did with the club."

Wiki said, "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Dropped it out that sidelight, because there surely ain't any weapon in here."

Wiki paused, thinking this over, and then ventured, "So you need a volunteer to dive overboard and retrieve it?"

"That's exactly what I do want," said Captain Smith briskly, and strode over to the ladder.

The trouble was, he couldn't find a volunteer. The search party, straggling along from their failed hunt for the maul and the mirror, all denied the ability to swim, as did the off-duty watch when called up to deck. Captain Smith ordered Wiki to tell Miguel Gomes to do it, his logic being that any man with black hair and olive skin would naturally be able to swim like a fish, but Miguel,

looking more haunted and tragic than ever, shook his head. Wiki, it seemed, was the only man in the crew who was at home in the sea.

"Jes' what you expect of a *kanaka*," someone was heard to mutter derisively, "*kanaka*" being the Yankee whaler name for a Pacific Islander, which Wiki was generally considered to be, disregarding the fact that the half of him that was not American was actually New Zealand Maori. Captain Smith, ignoring this, warned Wiki that he would be closely watched from the rail, and then stood back as Wiki stripped, jumped, and dived.

The cool water closed pleasantly around his head and gurgled in his ears. All the world turned pale green. Wiki surfaced, shook his long hair back, blinked salt out of his eyes, and checked that he was directly under the porthole of the blubber room. Then he ducked, kicked, and arrowed down.

It wasn't hard to find his first objective because it was attached to a long cord that had become snagged in the weed that grew freely on the old ship's bottom. With a great splash Wiki surged to the top, the end of the cord in his grip. Again, he shook hair and water out of his eyes, and then with his free hand he grasped a dangling rope, and walked his way up the side of the ship.

"What you got there?" Captain Smith inquired.

Instead of answering, Wiki concentrated on hauling up the object that hung from the end of the cord. It was the lost mirror. The glass face was sadly cracked and shattered, and its fancy gilt frame was chipped, but it was unmistakably Captain Smith's property.

"What the hell?" said Captain Smith blankly. Wiki thought he'd discerned a swift intake of breath at the back of the group of clustered men. Without turning to look, he jumped onto the rail and dived overboard again.

This time he had to use his strength to wrestle the second object to the surface. Instead of trying to heave it one-handed up the side of the ship, he lashed it to the hanging rope, and then, after he had clambered back to deck, he hauled the dripping object up.

The topping maul. Captain Smith exclaimed, "You killed him with that hammer!"

"I did not," said Wiki, and turned to the cook. "Tell the truth!" he ordered.

The cook, who was a black man, had gone a sort of gray color. He stammered wordlessly, and then wept.

Mr. Starbuck cried, "But Cook can't be the killer! I heard Alfonso creating all kinds of hell after he came back on deck, and no one went down after that—not until you did, Wiki Coffin!"

"But he did leave the maul at the back of the galley again," said Wiki. "It's just he's scared to admit he made the same mistake twice."

"So why did he throw it overboard—and my mirror?" the captain demanded.

"The mirror wasn't thrown overboard," Wiki said. "It was dangled by the string to attract Alfonso's attention, so that he put his head out the sidelight. Then the maul was dropped on top of his head, killing him instantly. If the porthole had been bigger, he would have toppled out of it, and into the sea. Instead, he flopped back inside the hold."

"The cook did *that*?" Captain Smith echoed. His face had gone quite blank.

"Not the cook," Wiki contradicted. "It was Miguel."

Another gasp from the back of the group, and then a flurry of movement. For a moment it looked as if Miguel would jump overboard and make a break for it, but the quickwitted third mate grabbed him just in time. For a moment the Brazilian stood rigid, but then he collapsed in the officer's grip, sobbing inconsolably.

"**H**is own brother!" said Captain Smith to Wiki as they trudged down the path past the little graveyard where Alfonso was buried. They were coming back from the indictment, which had been presided over by the local justice of the peace, who was the fellow who administered law, order, and the collection of taxes in this village from a building flying the green and gold flag of the Brazilian Empire. Miguel had made a full confession, witnessed by the captain, the magistrate, and a dozen taxpaying citizens, and then had been led away in chains to face trial in Rio de Janeiro.

"His own *brother*," Captain Smith repeated and shook his head. "The very last person I would have suspected! How did you figure it was him?"

"Miguel was the only man on board who knew that making a noise wouldn't attract Alfonso's attention—that he had to lower something that would catch the moonlight and make Alfonso curious enough to put his head out the sidelight."

"The only man who knew he was deaf?"

"Aye," said Wiki. Apart from himself, of course. That didn't count.

"But . . . why kill him? His own brother!"

"A brother who was nothing but a burden. Miguel had had the responsibility of a violent, stupid, ungrateful man for so long that

it's probably no wonder he snapped," Wiki said, then added, "There was also a woman involved."

"A woman?" Captain Smith's tone became alert.

"Miguel wished very much to marry her, but it was impossible while he was encumbered with his brother. That was why he signed himself and Alfonso onto the *Paths of Duty*—he hoped that his brother would find life at sea to his liking, and would become independent at last, which would allow Miguel to return alone to Rio to resume his courtship. Instead of settling down, though, Alfonso just got into more trouble. It must have been very frustrating—so frustrating that it drove Miguel to murder."

They had arrived on the beach. Captain Smith stopped, his boots planted firmly in the sand and his fists set on his hips while he contemplated his shabby ship. His expression had become moody. "A woman, huh?" he said again.

"Aye, sir," said Wiki.

"Women—they're the very devil. Believe me, boy, the sex is best avoided," the jilted shipmaster assured him earnestly. "Take my advice, and you'll grow up a much happier man."

Wiki paused. He might be only seventeen, but like most Maori men he had matured early, and had quickly learned to enjoy the company and comfort of warm and lively girls. However, because he had also learned some wisdom in dealings with men, captains, and officers, he opted for diplomacy.

"I'm sure you're right, sir," he blithely lied. ♀

CONVERSATION WITH

JOAN DRUETT

AHMM readers first made Ms. Druett's acquaintance in the November 2004 issue. Her story "Brethren of the Sea" appeared at the same time that her first Wiki Coffin novel, *A Watery Grave*, was published. Her book *Exotic Intruders* (1983) first led her down the maritime path. Ms. Druett tells us that in researching that book she became fascinated with the eccentric ship captains and pas-

sengers who brought the invasive animals and plants to the South Sea islands. She has since published six nonfiction books on the lives of the men—and women—who peopled the whaling ships in the nineteenth century and, more recently, four novels in the Wiki Coffin series. Before she turned to writing Ms. Druett taught biology and English literature in New Zealand.

AHMM: You've written many non-fiction books about the age of sail. What first drew you to this subject matter,

and what about it continues to engage you?

JD: I literally fell into maritime history, when I stumbled into the 140-year-old grave of a whaling wife on the island of Rarotonga. Her name was Mary Ann Sherman, and she had been the wife of Captain Abner Devoll Sherman (well-named, as he was a devil who went in for a lot of flogging, particularly picking on the steward). Mary Ann was twenty-four when she died in January 1850. How could I not be fascinated?

AHMM: What has particularly surprised you—or surprised your audiences—about this era?

JD: Having read hundreds of seafaring journals, letters, and memoirs written in both the forecabin and the cabin, I never stopped being amazed how the personalities of the long-dead writers jump off the pages they wrote. I think my readers marvel that I so obviously consider these past seafarers my friends.

AHMM: You were already well known for your nonfiction when you started your mystery series. What prompted you to make your move to fiction?

JD: My agent! She asked me to

try a historical mystery series set at sea, and I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to describe the experiences of one of the many adventurous Polynesians who sailed on American ships. This happened mostly on whaleships, which is why I have set the mystery stories on Wiki's first ship after he ran away from New England, the old Nantucketer *Paths of Glory*.

AHMM: Your series is set during the U.S. Exploring Expedition. What attracted you to that expedition as a setting for your novels?

JD: I reviewed Philbrick's *Sea of Glory* for the *Boston Globe*, and thought what a wonderful background it would make for the series. (Note the resemblance to the name of Wiki's first ship!) All that conflict between the officers, and all those colorful landfalls, the tremendous amount they accomplished—I found it all fascinating. I also find it constantly intriguing that the expedition has been lost to history.

AHMM: As a New Zealander, why did you choose an American Expedition?

JD: Because I am totally in love with American maritime history. Can you think of anyone

else who owns FOUR histories of the U.S. Navy? And that doesn't count the fifty books of American whaling history I own.

AHMM: Tell us a little bit about your series protagonist, Wiki Coffin. How did he come about?

JD: Wiki Coffin is based on a real Maori who sailed with the U.S. Exploring Expedition. He was Jack Sac, or "Tuatti" (probably Te Aute), who hailed from the little island of Motiti, off the eastern coast of the North Island of New Zealand. The officers of the expedition wrote so condescendingly about him that I wondered what he thought of them. To describe this, I needed a character with fluent English, and so Wiki became half American, with an American education, and with an American friend to confide in. He also needed a good sense of humor, and Wiki has plenty of that.

AHMM: Your latest nonfiction work is *Island of the Lost*. Can you tell us a little about that book?

JD: In the year 1864 there were two ships wrecked on totally uninhabited Auckland Island in the subantarctic, where winds blow with unbelievable force,

and temperatures hover about freezing at all times of the year.

In the far south of the island were five ordinary seamen from the *Grafton*, who worked together under the strong leadership of one man to create order out of chaos; building a house with a huge stone hearth, a forge, and a tannery. Though they had to manufacture every single nail, and most of their tools, they even managed to build a getaway vessel.

Meanwhile, twenty miles of impassable cliffs and chasms away, nineteen seamen from the *Invercauld* floundered ashore. Lacking leadership and a sense of community, they succumbed to chaos, breaking apart into separate groups and even descending to cannibalism. Only three survived, to be rescued by a passing ship.

This is no simple castaway account. Instead, it is a true story illustrating the importance of leadership, brotherhood, and camaraderie. In these uncertain times, it is a testament to what the spirit of man can achieve, and what happens if we don't pull together.

Very excitingly, it is going to be made into a film—by South Pacific Pictures, the producers of the blockbuster *Whale Rider*.

CLAUSTROPHOBE

TERRY BLACK

At first, he wouldn't wear the mask. He said it was claustrophobic. "You try covering your nose and mouth and going to sleep," he said. "It's like lying in a coffin. All you need are worms and some damp soil."

Celia clamped the mask over his face, cinching the straps tight. "Come off it, Jim—you're down in the mine every day, but you can't put something over your face?"

"That's different," he said irritably.

"Well, get used to it. You heard the doctor. If you go to sleep without the mask, you could die."

"How do I know the mask won't kill me?"

Celia smiled serenely. It might at that, she thought. But she only said, "Stop fussing," and put the light out, pulling the down comforter up over her shoulders against the evening's chill. After a while Jim accepted the inevitable, settling down with the mask firmly in place. Soon he was sleeping soundly, his breathing deep and regular, thanks to the compressed air machine.

Doc Powell had told them about it when the results came back from Jim's sleep test. "You have sleep apnea," he said, displaying a cutaway chart of the respiratory system. "When you sleep, your throat closes and you stop breathing. The body starts gasping for air, fighting suffocation, and then you breathe. But it's very bad for you—like holding your breath until you can't stand it, over and over, all night long."

The good news was that it was treatable. Jim was given a square gray machine, shoebox sized, that pumped air into his lungs through a flexible hose and face mask. It kept him breathing evenly all night long, which lowered his blood pressure and reduced the risk of stroke and heart attack.

"It'll add years to your life," Doc Powell promised.

He sounded so convincing, Celia recalled, listening to Jim's now-regular breathing. But he was wrong.

Jim had to be up early the next morning, before dawn, for the

morning shift at Bone Hollow. He'd be down in the mine before the sun came up, and not home till it set again. He'd wonder aloud if the sun was still up there—"I'm like a vampire, I never see it"—living in a world of perpetual darkness, deep beneath the earth. Toby Mercer came by to pick him up at four forty-five A.M., and they drove off to the mine in his Chevy pickup.

Which left Celia all day long to do the chores and tend the house, and anything else she thought worth doing.

Today she had a special job.

It had to be done carefully, so that Jim wouldn't notice. She'd need a drill, their new garden hose, a hacksaw, and duct tape. All were stashed in the garage. She put away the breakfast dishes, got a load of laundry going—cotton whites, heavy load, warm rinse—and set her plan in motion.

She took the garden hose, measured it carefully, and sawed it clear through. She took the drill into the bedroom, bored a hole through the baseboard by Jim's side of the bed, and widened it to the diameter of the hose. She went outside, played the hose through the opening, went back in, and spliced the hose into the flexible tube from Jim's air compressor, sealing it with duct tape. The other end she taped to the exhaust pipe of the family Buick.

That night, she'd grind a sleeping pill into Jim's after-dinner beer. He'd pass out in bed, insensible. She'd go outside and start the car, and Jim would breathe a mixture of compressed air and carbon monoxide.

Later, she'd replace the spliced tube with an undamaged spare. She'd take the doctored tube and hose and pitch them into the Susquehanna, then go home and call 911 and say, "Come quick, please, my husband's not breathing!" The coroner would blame natural causes because Jim had been considered at-risk from the moment they'd discovered his sleep apnea.

He'd be swiftly, expeditiously dead. And she'd no longer be a miner's wife.

It was supposed to be a temp job, just a stopgap until he found something better. Fresh out of high school, Jim and Celia were planning their lives together, dreaming big about the future. Jim was taking business management classes, grooming himself for an executive position at one of the big firms in Harrisburg. But he needed something to cover expenses and the mines were hiring. Besides, the benefits package was too good not to enroll. Jim meant to keep taking those classes, really he did, but the work was exhausting and the money was better if you took more hours, and

somehow over the next few months Jim's part-time job became full time, then full time plus, then lifetime.

He was never tan. His skin was rough from the work but pasty white from lack of sunshine, and he smelled like the mine, a greasy composite of dirt and methane. Worse, the coal dust would get in his clothes, into the carpet and furniture. She never saw him anymore but she could smell him, and taste him, and feel his dirty residue in everything she tried futilely to clean.

She'd scrub his workshirts and scrape his boots, and think how their ambitions had given way to the daily challenge of just getting by.

Celia thought about that hard and often, going over it in her mind, as the husbands talked about tearing rock from a hole and their wives jabbered endlessly about bleach and detergents and those hard-to-get-out mineral stains. Every day was like the next one; the best you could hope for was to end up no worse off than when you started.

She would pay the bills and do the chores and wait out the hours until Jim came home all dirty and spent and ill tempered, until finally Celia knew two things. First, that she could not live this way, not another year, not another minute. She was suffocating in this bucolic wilderness. And second, that she had a way out, an escape hatch, thanks to the generous life insurance policy provided by Cowper and Baldwin's human resources department.

A policy she was soon to collect on.

She finished her laundry, tidied up around the house, and decided to prepare Jim's last meal, shepherd's pie, made of ground beef and mashed potatoes topped with cheddar cheese. The perfect meal before lying down to a carbon monoxide nap.

She was pulling it out of the oven, savoring its rich aroma, when the phone rang.

"Celia, turn on the TV!" It was Julie Sutton from two doors down. "There's been an explosion down at the mine!"

At first, details were sketchy. The explosion had shaken the earth; cameras showed smoke and fire pouring from the mine entrance. Rescue technicians were setting up a command base, assessing the disaster. Eighteen miners were known to be trapped underground. Julie's husband was one of them.

Jim was another.

Celia took the Buick into town, remembering to untape the exhaust pipe. She found Julie at the Civic Center auditorium, where families and friends of the trapped miners were gathering. They looked haggard and lost, sloppily dressed, all asking the same

questions: What have you heard? Have they found them? Are they alive?

The crowd kept growing by the minute. Word of the disaster had spread rapidly throughout the close-knit community of Whisper Creek, drawing neighbors together in a way nothing else could. In a company town, everyone knew one of the miners, or their children or close relations. If an entire town could panic, they were doing it now.

Except Celia, who feigned sadness but felt no particular grief of her own. She thought merely, Now I won't have to kill him. Luck, or fate, or God is doing it for me.

"I'm so scared," said Julie.

They were standing in front of a message board in the Civic Center mezzanine, normally devoted to announcements of lost pets, bake sales, or used cars on sale with "some repairs needed." Now the messages were of a sadder variety. Eighteen pictures had been tacked up there, with room for well-wishers to write in their comments.

I LOVE YOU STEVE COME HOME. DAD YOUR GOING TO BE ALLRIGHT. MARK DON'T GIVE UP JESUS LOVES YOU.

Julie approached Dave's picture, touching it as if her husband could somehow feel it. She sniffled but didn't cry. She wrote BE SAFE and dropped the pen. Celia looked at Jim's picture, grinning stupidly with his miner's hat on sideways, his eyes raccoon dark from coal dust, the mouth of Bone Hollow yawning hungrily behind him. She wrote TO JIM and passed the pen along to a woman with red-rimmed eyes in a floral print housecoat.

"It was methane," someone was saying, in a little knot of people standing off to the side. "There was a pocket of gas, built up over time. Must have been a spark, set it off."

"Maybe someone was smoking."

"No one smokes in a mine."

Celia wondered if it even mattered what had caused the explosion. The bottom line was the roof had collapsed, they were sealed inside, and rescue was uncertain. Unless a miracle happened, they were just hours from suffocating.

Jim was going to die, just as she'd planned. He was even going to die *how* she'd planned. The parallel was so striking she could almost see a linkage between the events, as if the tragedy looming in Whisper Creek was an echo of her own intentions.

Just a coincidence, she thought uneasily.

"Can I have your attention?" asked an amplified voice.

At the front of the auditorium, a nervous man in a too tight suit

stood facing the microphone. He held a couple of crumpled sheets and kept looking at them as he spoke.

"My name is Douglas Wertham," he said, looking ill at ease. "I'm the managing director of the Cowper and Baldwin Mineral Company, and I'll be passing along information as we get it. Unfortunately, I don't have much to tell you. We do know the section of the mine where those men are trapped is equipped with emergency breathing devices, with hours of extra oxygen should they need it."

"They had them in the Sago Mine," someone yelled. "They didn't work."

"I can assure you the devices are regularly inspected, and fully operational."

"Are they alive?" asked a harried woman, pushing to the front. "*Are they alive?*"

Wertham sighed. "We hope so. But we can't be certain." He glanced at his notes. "I can tell you that we're bringing in special drilling equipment, rescue technicians, and advisors from the Mine Safety Administration in Uniontown. All we ask is that you keep on praying for the best." For a moment he seemed to look right at Celia. "Everyone wants those men to be all right."

She blanched, looking away.

Wertham left the stage. People surged toward him, shouting questions, but he had nothing more to tell them. They were left to stand and wait in the Civic Center auditorium, all but one of them dreading further news.

Hours passed. Wertham announced that they were trying to pinpoint the men's exact location using mine maps and surveying equipment, but it wasn't exact because they didn't know how badly the mine had been damaged, and where the men were at the time of the blast. The plan was to drill down into the tunnel and verify that the men were still alive. But they could miss by three feet, and have to start all over again.

Or hit it squarely and accomplish nothing, because the men were already dead.

Celia watched her friends' hopes rise and fall with each new rumor, stuck between hope and despair, unable even to resign themselves to failure. She watched their desperation and tried to mimic it herself, tried to play the grieving housewife, begging a God she didn't trust for an outcome she didn't want, as the anxious minutes passed.

At 2:05 A.M they stopped drilling, withdrew the bit, and

moved to a new location. The foreman of the rescue team spoke furiously, his words not carrying to Celia's ears but his attitude plain in the glow of the arc lamps. Julie made the sign of the cross. Celia sighed and tried to get comfortable in a camp chair brought in for the occasion.

At four fifteen A.M. Wertham announced that the drill had broken through into tunnel nine, where the first team had been stationed. They'd been hoping the survivors would strike the drill bit with their hammers to signal that they were alive. But no one had. The only alternative was to go in and find them, which could take hours or even days.

"I'm going home," Celia said wearily. "If they find anything, call me."

Back at home, Celia swapped out the booby-trapped hose from Jim's air compressor and stowed it in the Buick's trunk. Jim's murder would have been painless, but now he was dying a ghastlier death, slowly smothering in a mix of noxious gases. She tried to imagine it, buried alive in a deep stone box with scant hope of escape or survival.

You'd want to tear at the ceiling, try to claw your way free, scrape your fingers bloody raw as it got harder and harder and harder to breathe—

She found herself gasping.

He's probably dead already, she thought, surprised at her own unease. She wanted to feel guilty, though the blame wasn't hers. Her plan had been rudely preempted.

She went into the kitchen and poked around. The shepherd's pie was still in the fridge, tucked away where she'd left it this morning. She started to cut herself a slice, thought, Shame to spoil it for Jim, then caught herself almost missing him.

She heated a slice in the microwave, but couldn't finish it.

Celia slept fitfully and woke up tangled in bedclothes, unable to recall her dreams but certain they'd been unpleasant ones. The walls of the bedroom seemed to press in on her, contracting like a deflated lung. The air was hot and stale. Jim's side of the bed was undisturbed, as if she were already a widow.

She dressed, picked at a piece of dry toast, washed it down with a swig of juice. A TV newswoman wondered loudly if the miners were still alive. "It's a race against time," she said, the drilling equipment poised behind her. "With no response from the miners, hopes are fading." She started to say something about methane buildup, but Celia shut it off.

She got in the Buick and drove out to the riverbank on Old Haverstock Road. She heaved the the doctored hose into the mud-brown water and watched it swirl away: She slammed shut the trunk and headed downtown.

It was a madhouse. Film crews, journalists, and paparazzi swarmed the plaza, seeking images of tragedy to beam back home. Celia walked among them, drawing little attention. She reached the Civic Center, found a gaggle of townspeople on the front steps. A stout woman with wirebrush hair being interviewed said, "God would never let those poor men die."

He's done it before, Celia thought, hustling past her.

Julie was waiting inside.

"There's no Little League today," she said, sitting on one of the camp chairs, nursing a Thermos-cup of coffee. "No one cares about baseball."

Celia recalled Julie's towheaded boys, aged six and eleven, always getting hurt and needing stitches or something. "Where are the kids now?"

"At their grandmother's. She's keeping them until—" Julie tripped over the words. "—for as long as it takes."

"I'm sure Dave's fine," Celia said, not really believing it but wanting to sound supportive. "We've got half the county trying to pull them out of there."

"I know." Julie stirred coffee with her finger. "It's just . . . I'm not as strong as you are, Celia. I don't know how you keep going."

Then Edna Braddock came over with some walnut brownies that she'd baked last night at four A.M. because "I had to do something." One of the other wives had loganberry tarts, and everyone thanked her, though no one was terribly hungry.

"Look this way!"

A flashbulb went off in their faces, some young reporter from one of the big syndicates. Celia wanted to pop him one. She sat stock still instead, letting the circus swirl around her, wondering how many banner headlines it would take to chronicle the disaster.

She smelled gas.

It was impossible, surely, an upwelling of gas into the Civic Center auditorium? Impossible, but there it was—the noxious tang of methane, making Celia's stomach clutch. She couldn't believe the others had missed it, how could anyone, it was so obvious—

Then it was gone.

She sniffed the air, uncomprehending. The only smell was from Edna's walnut brownies.

"Can I have your attention?" said Douglas Wertham, adjusting the volume on his microphone. "I'm afraid we've hit a snag." There was a squawk, and the volume became tolerable. "We tried to drill through the obstruction, but the gas hasn't reached safe levels—we could trigger a secondary explosion. We're running the ventilators, and we expect to try again in a few hours." He exited amid a hubbub of shouted questions.

Edna Braddock choked back a sob. Julie flung her Thermos cup against the wall, making a Rorschach splash of cold coffee.

Around five thirty P.M. they tried again, picking a path through the shale and sandstone, securing the roof with expansion bolts and hoping nothing broke loose. The gas had dispersed, but it was slow going just the same. The miners had been without fresh air for nearly thirty hours.

Father Sandusky held a special Saturday Mass at St. Andrews. Celia and some of the other wives left their vigil to attend services, seeking comfort in shared worship. They watched Father Sandusky ascend to the pulpit, ruddy cheeked and barrel chested, the cleric's collar tight around his bulldog neck.

"Hope is the noblest of human ambitions," he said, with obvious feeling. "And the greatest hope is the hope of salvation. As I speak, eighteen men are in terrible danger. But they're men of God," he said, his gaze sweeping the congregation, "and if they're called home today, or tomorrow, or fifty years from now, their final reward will be just the same."

Julie sniffled, nodding her head. Celia sensed that the sermon was helping her cope, paving the way for a weary acceptance. Celia herself felt no relief. If Jim was called heavenward, she wouldn't be joining him.

After mass a bingo game had been scheduled, but the event was canceled. "It's like baseball," Julie said. "No one wants to play now." Celia frowned, wondering why a bingo game should be so upsetting to the good citizens of Whisper Creek, until Julie added, "Because what if they win?"

And suddenly Celia could picture it, the horror of this silly game through the prism of a grief not her own—the prickly business of claiming the jackpot, the strained congratulations, the irony of pocketing a juicy bonus while eighteen men lay trapped under tons of carbonaceous rock, gasping like trout in a bucket—

"We'd better go," said Julie.

They drove back to the Civic Center. It was dark out, the sec-

ond nightfall since the explosion. The parking lot was overrun with curiosity seekers loudly trading gossip and a growing horde of journalists conducting on-the-spot interviews or doing local-color reports in front of some photogenic landmark.

Celia and Julie had to identify themselves at the door. The attendant nodded and waved them inside. They were settling into a couple of seats reserved for family members when Edna Braddock ran up and said breathlessly, "Something's happened. I think they found them."

For an instant Celia thought, I'm free.

If Jim came out of the dark hole, she'd have a second chance, absolved of her phantom crime, released from this dark place where the grief of an entire town was an indictment of her intentions. She'd greet him joyously, her life restored as surely as his.

But then she looked at Edna's face, and heard the scratchy voice of Douglas Wertham over the PA system:

"I'm sorry to inform you," he said, not looking up, "that the miners have been found, and they are not alive."

There was a sudden, pin-drop silence. Someone said, "Oh my God" and started crying, and the hall erupted with expressions of grief and horror. Wertham attempted a dry recitation of the evening's events—when and where the miners had been found, their estimated time of death within eight hours of the blast, and the disposition of the bodies. Some of the men had written messages to their loved ones.

Celia didn't want to read Jim's message. It was poisonous, radioactive. She saw Edna and Julie and the other wives tearfully embracing, drawing comfort from their shared grief. She wanted no part of it. She wanted only to flee the Civic Center, to shun the caustic sympathy of friends and well-wishers and escape into the cool night air.

But the night wasn't cool, it was stifling. Reporters surged toward her, babbling questions: "How do you feel?" "Did it come as a shock?" "What will you do now?"

She tried to bite back the answer rising like bile in the back of her throat. She wanted to turn aside, deflect their questions, and get out of there. She looked into the forest of microphones and couldn't stop herself from speaking.

"I was going to kill my husband," she said.

There was a moment's pause, a brief silence. She heard someone saying, "I don't know, Rob, some nutcase." Then the reporters

surged past her, surrounding the Civic Center waiting for the others to emerge. Celia shouted after them, but no one seemed to care. The press corps had dismissed her, seeking predictably grieving relatives who better fit their profile.

"I don't quite understand," Sheriff Dan Howard said, his fingers entwined on the desktop. "You're confessing to something that didn't happen?"

"I was going to kill my husband," Celia said fervently, as if saying it for the ninth time might be more convincing than the eighth, seventh, or sixth. "I sabotaged his breathing machine. He would have inhaled carbon monoxide. You never would have caught me."

The sheriff shook his head. "Carbon monoxide poisoning is distinctive and traceable. It's not a very good plan. Can I see this, uh, tube you've altered?"

"I threw it in the river," she said.

"So there's no real evidence of any of this?"

"I'm confessing. What more do you need?"

Howard hesitated, choosing his words carefully. He was a big man, sandy haired, fiftyish, thickening at the waist. He had sad brown eyes. He said, "Not everyone handles tragedy in the same way."

"What do you mean?"

"The death of a loved one can be very painful. It's hard to believe something so awful could be so random, so out of our control." He shook his head. "I've seen people convince themselves that something was their fault, even though it wasn't, because as bad as it is to cause something, it's worse to think there's no cause—that the whole thing was just a senseless accident. For some people, that's too much to accept."

Celia frowned, trying to understand. "You're saying I made this up?"

"No, ma'am. I'm saying anything's possible. Maybe you thought about it. Maybe you worked it out. Maybe you even set it in motion, though it's funny how there's no way of proving that. All I know is I'm not going to arrest you." He stood up, opened a file drawer. "Excuse me, I've got work to do."

"But you have to arrest me," Celia said. "I was going to kill my husband!"

"I'm sorry," he said, turning his back.

Celia looked at the framed certificates on the wall of Howard's office, at the gun rack boasting six Sharp's rifles, and at the fugitive postings tacked to a cluttered corkboard. She saw the double-

locked door marked DETENTION, where suspects were kept in holding cells awaiting transport to Bucks County Jail.

She went outside, but she wasn't free. She was trapped in a wider cave, a sprawling maze of ground and stone, the sky above no longer a space, but a thick and leaden ceiling.

She got in the Buick and drove home, down narrow streets seeming to constrict around her, like a tightening hand. She found herself in the kitchen, looking at Jim's uneaten shepherd's pie and thinking of everything they might have had, the squandered chances of a lifetime.

She smelled gas again. They had a gas range. It was turned off, of course. If she snuffed the pilot and turned the dial, the smell would become quite real.

Celia wondered if she might do that. There was a certain symmetry to it, but the need was not urgent; she felt no hurry.

She had the luxury of time. ♀

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

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From "The Flying Stars" in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911)

—G. K. Chesterton

Many a man I've known started like you to be an honest outlaw, a merry robber of the rich, and ended stamped into slime.

BLACK ORCHID NOVELLA AWARD

JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

We're pleased to present here the winner of what will be an annual contest sponsored by Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and the Wolfe-Pack. The Black Orchid Novella Award honors novella-length stories in the classic detective mode of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe. For more information about the contest, go to www.nerowolfe.org.

HORSE PIT

When the telephone rang, I rolled over and squinted at it. *Not again.* Why couldn't people leave me alone? If I wanted to sit in my apartment and drink until the pain stopped, was that too much to ask?

Sighing, I fumbled the receiver to my ear. Probably telemarketers. Best to get it over with.

"Hullo?" I rasped. My mouth tasted like day-old bread.

"Pit?" It was David Hunt, my only remaining friend. We had been in the same fraternity in college. I hadn't heard from Davy in a couple of weeks, so the call was due.

Groaning, I managed to sit up. My head throbbed and my bones ached; the room tilted out from under me. Where had I put that bottle of Jack Daniel's? Probably somewhere under the covers, hopefully with the cap still on. Booze was the only thing that blunted the pain from my ruined legs. And it had the welcome side effect of slowing my always racing mind.

"Hi, Davy," I managed to say in an almost normal voice.

"You up?" he asked.

"Kinda." I yawned. "What time is it?"

"Midnight."

That brought me fully awake. Davy was a morning person; he rarely stayed up past ten o'clock. Something must have happened. Something bad for him to call this late.

"What's wrong?" I demanded. "Are you and Cree all right?"

"We're fine. It's just . . . I bought a racehorse!"

I blinked. "What?"

"A racehorse. Pretty cool, huh? His name's Bailey's Final Call, and he's won several stakes races over the last year."

"Are you insane?" I rubbed my crusty eyes, wishing I'd never awakened, wishing I'd never been born. "You called me at midnight to say you bought a horse?"

"Yep!"

"You barely know which end to feed!"

"That's what jockeys are for."

I thought he was joking. I hoped he was joking.

Davy went on, "Actually, I'm one-fifth owner. A bunch of us formed a mini syndicate. Opportunity of a lifetime and all that."

Since Davy was already worth upwards of fifty million, if anyone could make a profit from a horse, he could. He had a Midas touch.

But why call me? I had no interest in horses. And why so late? Something didn't fit.

Gingerly, I eased my feet to the floor. "What are your plans for this unfortunate creature?" I asked. Flicking on the light, I felt around my faded blue bedspread. Where had that bottle gone?

Davy said, "A few more races, then we put him out to stud."

"Is there money in that?" Maybe Bailey's Final Call wasn't so unfortunate.

"For a champion? You'd better believe it. I think—"

I found my Jack Daniel's—cap on, but empty. So much for that. I added it to the growing pile of empties in the corner as Davy nattered on about his horse, but I only half listened. I'd have to recycle everything soon.

"—already worth more than a hundred thousand a year in stud fees," Davy was saying. "There will be more—lots more—if he keeps on winning."

I whistled. "The sex trade really pays." What was the average life span of a horse, anyway? Twenty years? Thirty? At a hundred thousand a year . . . or more . . .

"It pays for horses, anyway."

"And what did this creature cost?"

"A lot."

"Davy . . ." A warning note crept into my voice. "I know you're calling because you want my help with something, so don't get cute. How much did you spend?"

He laughed, but uncertainly, as if he had something to hide. That sent up more warning flags.

"Spill it!" I ordered.

"Okay, okay. We each chipped in two hundred thousand."

I gasped. "You spent a million dollars on one horse? What were you thinking?"

"Bailey is a champion." He sounded defensive. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"But now you think you were ripped off."

A confirming silence followed. My doubts turned into a horrible premonition.

"Davy-boy?" I said.

"Let's say I have a bad feeling. Will you help me or not?"

"I know nothing about racing. I know less about horses."

"You're the smartest guy I know, Pit. If anyone can spot a scam, you can."

"I'm flattered, but you need an expert. How about Dick Francis? That guy knows crime and horses. With your money, I bet you could rent him for an afternoon."

"Get serious, Pit. We've already had two vets and a trainer look Bailey over. They say he's sound of hoof and heart. By all accounts, he's the real deal."

"Then be happy. You got a bargain, right?"

"I don't know." He hesitated. "I can't put my finger on it. But something's wrong. Bailey sold way too cheap."

"A million dollars isn't cheap."

"For an investment that's going to yield three to ten million in profit, that's rock bottom. He's worth at least double what we paid."

"People find bargains all the time. I don't see your problem."

"Trust me on this."

"If you're getting cold feet, sell him off and count your blessings. And your profits."

"I can't. My partners plan on running Bailey in the Kentucky Derby. If I dump my share and something is wrong with him, everyone will think I found out and deliberately stuck my buddies. Lawsuits, ruined friendships, nasty gossip . . ."

"Better to go down with, er, the horse?"

"Exactly. So what do you say, Pit?"

"No." It didn't add up.

"Why not?"

"Because you aren't telling me the whole truth." I knew him too well. "Your story doesn't match your personality—or your finances. So have fun with your pet, and leave me out of it."

I hung up. Did I have another bottle of whiskey in the kitchen cabinet? Yesterday hazed over in my mind. I could have finished it in bed. But maybe not. I hobbled in to see.

The phone rang . . . and rang . . .

Nothing in the cabinet but a single can of tomato soup. Which meant I'd need to get dressed tomorrow and walk to the state store for more. God, I hated leaving my apartment.

Still the phone rang. Fifteen times. Twenty.

He wasn't going away. And if I didn't answer, he'd drive out and bang on my apartment door. He'd done it before.

At last I grabbed the receiver. "Yes?"

"What do you mean," he said as though I'd never hung up on him, "about my story not matching my personality?"

"Or your finances."

"Yeah. That too."

I sighed as I sat at my tiny kitchen table. "I have more than a vague idea of your net worth, Davy. Two hundred thousand is pocket change. You probably have that much lying around your house."

"Uh, maybe," he said. "But if I did, I'd keep it locked in a safe."

"Now," I continued, warming up, "let's assume you bought Bailey on a lark. You're rich; he's a new toy. Your golf club pals are pitching in too. But suddenly you panic. Why?"

"You tell me," he said.

"I can only think of one reason. Buying the horse became a point of honor." I paused, and the truth came to me like the final piece of a puzzle snapping into place. "Cree told you not to buy Bailey's Final Call, didn't she?"

Cree was Davy's fiancée, a stunning model—and not the bubblehead you'd expect from her *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit photos. I liked her a lot. In the last year, she had cured Davy of most of his playboy ways—Bailey's Final Call notwithstanding.

In a quiet voice, Davy said, "You're right. Cree told me not to join the syndicate. But I did it anyway. On paper it looks like it's a money maker. Better be, or I'll never hear the end of it. But now I'm getting a funny—"

"Maybe it's guilt," I said softly. After my nervous breakdown, I'd seen enough shrinks to last a lifetime. They had all talked to me in the same soothing tone. "Maybe you're looking for a way to get out of the deal for Cree's sake. After all, you don't want to fight with her."

"Something is wrong with that horse. I *know* it. You've got to help, Pit."

"But I can barely tell a fetlock from a furlong!"

"Don't make me beg."

Of all things, a racehorse. But I couldn't let my friend down. He was the only one who kept in touch, kept pushing me to leave my apartment, get outside and actually think. I would have drunk myself to death by now without him.

"All right," I said. "I'll do what I can. Where are you keeping this refugee from the glue factory?"

"Black Fox Farm in Buckston. That's in—"

"I know, Bucks County." About an hour north of Philadelphia. Lots of old money, lots of horses.

"I'm driving out tomorrow," Davy said. "Pick you up at eight?"

I muttered something about ungodly hours, but he laughed.

"Don't forget, dress for a farm." He hung up.

Against my will, odd bits of information about horses began popping into my head. I had one of those trick brains: I could recall every name, face, fact, and figure I had ever encountered while sober. To my surprise, lists of Kentucky Derby winners (and losers), Belmont Stakes purses, and even old episodes of *Mister Ed* and *My Friend Flicka* from a misspent childhood in front of the TV bubbled up. I knew more about horses than I'd thought.

Cursing Davy and his new toy, I levered myself out of my chair and limped around the apartment, bagging empty whiskey bottles, picking out clothes. So much for sleep. I'd never get any rest now.

The next morning, Davy roared up to my apartment building in his shiny silver BMW convertible, music blaring from the satellite radio. He owned half a dozen cars, and he'd chosen my personal favorite despite the slate gray sky threatening rain.

Leaning hard on the railing, I worked my way down four short steps to the sidewalk. It promised to be a hot, uncomfortable, muggy day—typical late June weather in Philadelphia.

Davy reached over and opened the door for me. When I glared, he grinned his perfect smile and touched the brim of his green *Sports Illustrated* cap in salute. God, I hate morning people. They're so damn cheerful.

"You owe me big for this."

"I'll name my first kid after you."

Snorting, I eased my way inside. He had already put the seat back as far as it would go. Tentatively, I stretched my legs out. I could endure the cramped space for an hour or so.

The moment I slammed the door, Davy accelerated into light rush hour traffic. Row houses streamed past. I buckled my safety belt and closed my eyes. The familiar smells of Philly's Northwood section—soft pretzels from vendors on the street corner, already baking asphalt, diesel bus exhaust—washed over me. Three blocks later, we turned into Roosevelt Boulevard's express lanes and sped up, heading north.

"Want to stop for coffee?" Davy asked.

"Are you trying to poison me?"

"You can't live on alcohol alone."

"One group of medieval monks lived on nothing *but* beer."

"Really?"

"They brewed it so thick, it became almost a bread. Beer and pizza gets me cheese and tomato sauce too. Covers all my food groups."

"Not healthy."

"Tell you what, get us there in forty-five minutes instead of an hour and you can buy me lunch at the restaurant of your choice."

Grinning, he floored the accelerator. He probably had visions of Salad Alley dancing through his head.

We flew until we left the city limits. Then we hit construction delays and crawled the last twenty miles. By the time Davy turned off Route 202 and onto a rutted gravel driveway, we had been driving almost two hours. Pains wracked my body, from the steel pins in my legs to my overly compressed spinal cord to the knotted-up muscles in my neck and shoulders. Fortunately, I had taken half a dozen aspirin before leaving my apartment. Those, plus the Motrin I had dry-swallowed on the road, made my pains almost bearable. I really needed something alcoholic.

Finally Davy said, "There it is."

I sat up straighter. A small, weathered sign said BLACK FOX FARM.

We turned onto a private road and cruised between two ivy-covered stone gateposts—the gates themselves were missing—then crossed a dense line of poplars and white birches, lush in their summer greenness.

Rounding a corner, the farm came into view. To the right, inside a pasture with a split rail fence, six brown and white horses raised their heads to gaze at us. To the left, in an exercise ring, a girl of nine or ten in an English riding habit sat astride a lanky brown horse with a white nose.

Two men stood watching the girl. One was thin and grizzled, with bib overalls and a Phillies baseball cap. The other was burly and grayhaired with a ponytail. Ponytail Man frowned as Davy neared.

"Is that girl riding Bailey?" I asked.

"Uh . . ." Davy squinted. "I'm not sure."

"You do know what your horse looks like?"

"He's brown."

I rolled my eyes.

Directly ahead sat a sprawling Victorian-style farmhouse. It had a fresh coat of white paint, but the roof and front porch sagged, and I got an impression of benign neglect. Picturesque oak trees flanked the house, half obscuring a pair of ancient red barns with fieldstone foundations. Both barns had Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs under the eaves. Any watercolor artist would have drooled.

The man with the ponytail left the exercise ring and stalked in our direction. He looked quite annoyed.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Mitch Goldsmith. We bought Bailey from him."

"Did you tell him we were coming?"

Davy grinned and waved to Mitch. Through his teeth, he said to me, "Why should I? It's my horse!"

"Only twenty percent."

Cruising past the exercise ring, Davy parked next to a battered silver horse van and a bright red Sebring convertible. As he cut the engine, I popped my door and heaved my feet out. White-hot fires surged the length of my legs. Gasping, I paused to knead and massage my calves through ridges of scar tissue. It took a minute, but the pain receded.

By the time I struggled to my feet, Mitch had reached the other side of the car. His stained navy blue polo shirt had BLACK FOX FARM stitched across the right breast in silver thread.

"Yo, Mitch," Davy said cheerfully. He tossed his baseball cap onto the dashboard and ran his fingers through his short blond hair. "How's Bailey this morning?"

"We don't like drop-in visitors," Mitch said. "It upsets the routine."

"Don't think of us as visitors, think of us as family." Davy flashed his perfect smile. "We're all in this together, right? As long as we're paying you to train Bailey."

"Care to make introductions?" I asked from across the car.

"Oh, sorry. Pit, this is Mitch Goldsmith, Bailey's trainer and former owner. Mitch, Pit Geller."

"Hello," I said. I limped around Davy's BMW, shifting my cane to my left hand and offering Mitch my right. Time to play peacemaker. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

He nodded brusquely. "Call me Mitch."

I learn a lot about a man in the first seconds of our initial meeting. Pity, revulsion, even outright fear—I've gotten it all since my accident. Pity gets me seats on crowded trains. Revulsion usually wears off with the realization that limps aren't contagious. Fear, though, never ends.

Mitch paid no notice to my handicap. He shook hands without hesitation, grip firm but not painful. His palms and fingers had plenty of calluses. Clearly this was no gentleman of leisure. I took an instant liking to him.

"Did I catch your name right?" he asked. "Pit?"

"A college nickname." I pulled a sour face. "Davy won't stop using it, much as I'd like him to. Call me Peter."

Mitch raised his eyebrows. "You went to school together?"

"Don't let him fool you," I said, lowering my voice. We were both thirty-one, but the years hadn't been kind to me. "Hair dye and plastic surgery did wonders for him. We're both from the class of '75."

"Pit!" Davy protested.

"Okay, okay. It's really the class of '73. I'm vain about my age too." I gave Mitch a wink, and he grinned.

Davy tried to say something but only managed exasperated noises. Mitch studied him with new interest. Probably wondering whether Davy really could be that old.

"Anyway," Davy said, giving me a dirty look, "we were in the neighborhood, and I thought we'd watch Bailey run."

Mitch glanced at his watch. "Too late. Bailey finished five minutes ago. You can watch him cool down, I guess."

"Where do you train him?" I asked.

Mitch waved at someplace beyond the barns. "It's a five-minute walk. We have fifty acres here, which includes a small

track. Follow the path behind the house if you want to see it."

"Another time." My legs weren't up to it; I needed more time to recover from the car ride.

"Why aren't *you* training Bailey?" Davy demanded.

"Do I look like a jockey?" Mitch gave him a withering glare. "I weigh a hundred pounds too much. My stepson is with him this morning. Don't worry, Bailey will be ready for the Derby." He turned toward the exercise ring, paused, glanced back at me. "Missy just made some pink lemonade. Might as well have a glass while you wait."

"Thanks." I would have preferred something stronger, but at least he hadn't offered water.

"That would be great," Davy said.

"Sure." Mitch headed for the house. Davy and I stood in silence till he was out of earshot.

"Well?" Davy asked.

"Definitely the criminal type," I said. "Pink lemonade. It's fiendish!"

Davy punched me in the arm—hard.

"Hey! Ow!" Davy didn't believe in coddling cripples either. Another reason I liked him so much.

"That's for the hair dye and plastic surgery," he said.

"What do you expect, dragging me out here for nothing?"

"I'm serious, Pit."

"Me too. Look at this place! It's falling apart." I pointed with my cane. "The house needs a new roof. The paint is a cheap, cosmetic fix. Ditto for both barns. The porch is collapsing. You're looking at eighty or ninety thousand for basic repairs. On top of that, he's got his own kid exercising Bailey rather than a pro. What does it add up to?"

"They need a good contractor?"

"They're broke. Mitch must have lucked out and gotten a champion racehorse, and he's cashing out because he can't afford to maintain the family farm any other way."

Davy paused. "You think so?"

"There's a reason horse racing attracts millionaires. Mitch is out of his league."

"Hmm." Davy stared into the distance. He'd have to work it out for himself.

A minute later, Mitch reappeared carrying a pair of cheap plastic lawn chairs. He set them up in the shade of one of the oak trees and beckoned us over.

"Take a load off, Peter," Mitch said. "You too, Hunt. Missy will be right out with lemonade."

"Might as well relax while we wait for Bailey," I said, limping forward.

"Yeah. I guess." Davy sounded more reserved than usual. No doubt disappointed that his conspiracy theory had fizzled.

"Thanks." I sagged into the closest seat and balanced my cane across my knees. Much better.

Behind me, the house door slammed. I half turned and spotted a thin woman with curly black hair headed our way. She wore a bright pink housedress with horses embroidered around the hem, and she carried a vintage '50s-style red plastic tray with a matching set of plastic glasses.

"Don't stand there," she called to Mitch. She had a definite South Jersey accent. "Bring one of those little tables for our guests!"

"Yes, Missy." Mitch trotted around the house again. I chuckled. His wife was a force to be reckoned with.

I struggled to my feet.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," I said.

"Don't you 'ma'am' me!" she said. If her hands had been free, she would have been gesturing and tsk-tsking. "I'm not your grandmother!"

"Yes, uh, Missy?"

"You must be Peter?"

"Peter Geller, yes."

Mitch sprinted back around the side of the house. He didn't have a table.

"Call Doc Christiansen, Missy!" he shouted. "Bailey's down!" Turning, he dashed out of sight.

Davy and I exchanged panicked looks.

"Go!" I told him. He sprinted after Mitch.

"Here, Peter." Missy thrust the tray into my hands before rushing back to the house.

I set Missy's tray on the seat of my chair, then followed Davy. I rounded the building to find a brown horse with a white star on his forehead and two white front feet lying on his side between the barns. His legs twitched faintly. A slender boy, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, lay across the animal's neck, keeping him on the ground. Mitch knelt by Bailey's head, stroking his nose and whispering soft words.

Davy stood to one side, arms folded, helpless.

"Missy's calling your vet," I said, panting hard, legs on the verge of buckling.

Bailey jerked twice, then lay still. Too still. Mitch rose slowly, face white.

"Doesn't matter now," he said, and his voice cracked. "He's . . . he's dead. Bailey's dead."

"No!" The kid clutched at the horse, fingers knotting in his mane. He managed to hold back tears.

Davy and I exchanged a glance. He had an I-told-you-so expression. But I couldn't believe Mitch would set us up. His reaction—and the kid's—felt real.

A distant *crack* echoed across the farm. Mitch staggered. An odd look came over his face. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. I saw the silver lettering on his shirt turn crimson.

"Mitch?" I said, not quite comprehending.

He slid to his knees. Blood flecked his lips and dribbled down his chin. He tried to speak. A heartbeat later, he fell face-first into the dirt.

"Get down!" I shouted, shoving Davy to the ground behind the horse.

"What—" Davy began.

"Sniper!" I said.

Mitch's son gaped at us. I reached over, grabbed his shirt and dragged him across the horse with more strength than I knew I had. I shoved his head to the dirt path.

"Keep down, kid!"

"But—" The boy struggled to get to his father, but I leaned hard and kept him in place. Thin as I was, I still outweighed him by thirty or forty pounds.

"Lie still," I snapped. No way was he standing up. "We'll get help. Davy—"

"Y-yes." He yanked his cell phone from its belt clip and dialed 911.

"Is that what happened to Bailey?" I asked the boy. I shook him to make him focus. "Was Bailey shot?"

"I—I don't know," he cried. "He collapsed—couldn't stand up—"

Davy reached an emergency operator and explained our situation. He listened, repeated himself, listened again, then lowered the phone.

"The police want us to stay down," he reported. "They're on

their way—and they've called an ambulance for Mitch."

"Good." I looked at the boy. "What's your name?"

"Bobby," he said, eyes wide.

"Bobby, listen. I have to ask you something important before the police get here." There was no easy way to put it. "This horse—he isn't Bailey's Final Call, is he?"

Bobby stared. "Of course he is. I've known him his whole life. You can't mistake the star on his forehead or his two white socks."

"Okay." I believed the kid. But it didn't make sense. Why shoot a champion horse? And why shoot Mitch? Common sense said Mitch should be the criminal, not the victim here.

I have to give the local police credit. Within two minutes of Davy's call, I heard the wail of approaching sirens. The sniper must have heard them too. I counted to twenty—time enough for him to make his getaway—then rose on unsteady legs. Nobody shot me. I scanned the distant trees before motioning Davy and Bobby up.

"Tell the ambulance driver where we are," I ordered Bobby. He took off running.

Davy continued talking on his cell phone, telling the police what was going on. He looked stunned. No help there.

I rolled Mitch onto his back and brushed dirt from his cheeks and forehead.

"Hey?" I asked. "Mitch? Can you hear me?"

His eyes opened. They had a glassy sheen, but focused on my face. Then he began to cough, and from deep in his chest came a liquid gurgle. That couldn't be good.

"Hang on," I said. I squeezed his limp hand. "You're going to be okay."

He turned his head slightly. His blood-flecked lips moved.

"Tell . . ." he breathed.

I bent close.

"Fifi . . . Dows . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Mitch?" I slapped his cheeks gently, but he had passed out.

Tell Fifi Dows? Who was she? And tell her what?

The back door of the house banged open, and Missy stepped out with a phone to her ear. From her expression, she hadn't heard a thing. She probably had their vet on the line.

She looked from the dead horse to me to Mitch. Then she dropped the phone and screamed.



Things got weird after that. An ambulance . . . police cars . . . flashing lights . . . Missy sobbing . . .

My eyesight narrowed into a kind of tunnel vision. I moved through an unreal haze as bits of conversation, out-of-focus faces, and pulsing red and white lights all jumbled together. A steady thrumming, like rain on a metal roof, filled my ears. I might have been a passenger in someone else's body.

Panic attack. As though in a dream, part of me diagnosed the problem with clinical precision. It had happened too many times before to count. But not this bad. Not in a long, long time. Not since New York.

A woman shoved a microphone into my face. I mumbled answers.

No, I don't know who fired the shots.

No, I don't know anything about Mitch Goldsmith.

No, I don't own Bailey's Final Call.

At one point a young-faced officer with a shaved head and Marine Corps tattoos on his forearms sat with me on the rear bumper of an ambulance. Someone had draped a blanket around my shoulders. I clutched my cane to my chest. I wanted to close my eyes and shut down, but people kept talking and talking and nudging me to respond.

"You did good," the officer said, patting my shoulder. "Don't worry, Pete, we'll get to the bottom of everything."

"No," I said numbly. "No, you won't."

"What makes you say that?"

"It was a very professional job."

The next thing I knew, I lay in the back seat of Davy's BMW. Night had fallen. Through the open roof, I stared up at an illuminated blue and yellow Best Western motel sign.

Davy must have registered us. He half carried, half dragged me into a room. I crawled into a queen-sized bed, pulled the covers over myself, and passed out.

Sometime later, a door squeaked open and hot morning sunlight splashed across my face. I crawled out of my mental hole. Sitting up, I shaded my eyes with a trembling hand and squinted into brightness.

Davy stood silhouetted in the doorway. He hefted a pair of

plastic grocery bags onto the round table by the window before turning in my direction.

"Feeling better?"

"No." I managed to sit up.

"You're talking. That's good. You're pretty freaky when you go non-verbal."

"I need a drink."

"Here." He rummaged around in one of the grocery bags, then tossed a can of Diet Dr Pepper onto the bed beside me.

I stared at it. "You have a cruel sense of humor."

"There's ice in the bucket by the sink. Glasses too. Drink up."

"I want whiskey."

"You're on the clock, Pit. No alcohol."

"I said I'd look at Bailey. He's dead. Take me home."

"We aren't leaving. I want to know who killed my horse."

"Only twenty percent yours." I paused. "What about Mitch? Is he okay?"

"No." His frown deepened. "The bullet nicked his heart, poor guy. He didn't make it to the hospital."

I flashed back to the farm. The *crack* of the rifle. The way Mitch fell. Something faintly wrong tickled at the back of my mind, but I couldn't quite place it. Later, maybe.

I said, "And what about Bailey?"

"Focus, Pit. I already told you he's dead."

"But was he shot?"

He blinked. "Uh, I never thought to ask. I just assumed, since Mitch . . ."

"Find out. I'm betting he wasn't."

"Why?"

"I only heard one shot."

In my head, I ran through our visit from the moment our car pulled into the driveway. I hadn't heard anything unusual before Mitch rounded the corner of the house. Nor had the sniper tried to shoot anyone after Mitch. Could Mitch have been his only target?

Davy said, "We have to stop at the police station this morning. They want us to sign the statements we made yesterday. They'll know what killed Bailey."

"Okay." A statement? What had I said?

He returned to his shopping bags. "Here. You'll want this too."

He tossed a bottle of generic aspirin next to the Diet Dr Pepper. At last, something useful. While I fumbled with the

shrink-wrap, he pulled out mouthwash, toothpaste and toothbrushes, deodorant, packages of generic white underwear, soy protein bars, a couple of cheap-looking gray T-shirts, and a copy of the *Bucks County Gazette*.

"I'll take the paper," I said.

"Here." He handed it over.

Bailey had made the front page. HORSE FARM SNIPER STRIKES! screamed a huge headline. The picture showed Mitch holding Bailey by his halter. Unfortunately, the article offered the barest of facts, but little interested me beyond the fairly impressive list of races Bailey had won.

I flipped through the rest of the *Gazette*, ignoring articles like "Severe Drought Warnings Bring Water Restrictions," "Police Corruption Alleged," and "Arsonist Sought in Bar Blaze" as irrelevant. The obituaries made no mention of Mitch Goldsmith, either. We'd have to pick up the next edition. I wanted to know more about Mitch, a lot more.

At last I lowered the paper. "What next?"

"There's an outlet village down the road," Davy said, "but it's not open yet. We can get clean clothes later. In the meantime . . ." He tossed me one of the gray T-shirts. It said NEW HOPE, PENNSYLVANIA in neon green letters.

Great. We'd look like tourists.

We reached the police station two hours later. Davy pulled into a spot next to the same bright red Sebring convertible I'd seen at Mitch's place. "HRSKYD" read the license plate. "Horse kid"? Probably Mitch's car. Missy must be here.

Davy strolled inside, introduced himself at the front window, and asked for Detective Nunes. I tried to remember Nunes, but drew a blank.

"She's with someone," the officer behind the window replied. His name tag said L. WEINSTEIN. He pointed with his pen toward a line of gray plastic chairs. "Take a seat. I'll call you when she's free."

"Thanks." Davy led the way.

A kid slouched in one of the chairs, head down, watching music videos on an iPod. When he raised his head, I recognized Mitch's son, Bobby.

"Hi," he said, voice flat. He pulled out his earbuds.

Davy gave a "Yo" and a nod.

"Hi." I motioned Davy toward the far end of the line of chairs.

He played along and went off by himself. "Do you remember me?" I asked Bobby. "Peter Geller."

"Sure."

"I'm sorry about what happened." I settled onto the chair next to him. My hands had begun to tremble, not nerves, but a deep, dull pain. I needed a drink to steady myself.

"Thanks. What happened to you?"

"Got run over by a New York taxi. Years ago."

"No, I meant yesterday."

He must have seen me shutting down. "A panic attack. I get them when I'm stressed out." I shrugged, cleared my throat. "Anyway, have they arrested anyone yet?"

"No. They keep saying the investigation is ongoing."

"How is your mother?"

"At my aunt's house. She's not taking it very well."

I made sympathetic noises.

"How about Fifi?"

He blinked. "Who?"

"I thought you might know her." It had been worth a try. *Tell Fifi Dows*. First, I had to find her.

I went on, "What about Bailey. Do you know what happened to him?"

Bobby shrugged, face tightening. "He died."

"Shot?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. I didn't see any blood."

"Did he stumble? What happened?"

"I was walking him back to the ring, and all of a sudden he jerked the reins out of my hands. Instead of running, though, he went down on his knees, then his side. He tried to get up, but couldn't."

"Did you hear anything?"

A blank look. "Like what?"

"A shot? I heard one when your father was hit."

"No." He looked at his feet. "I didn't hear anything but Bailey."

"Bailey?"

"He was crying—the way horses do when they're hurt. You know?"

"Yes." I could imagine it.

The inner door opened and a stern-faced policewoman stepped out. She wore a navy skirt and a pale blue blouse with a name tag like the officer at the reception window.

"That's for me," Bobby said, rising.

He jogged forward, accepted some papers from the woman, and said something too low for me to overhear. Then he hurried out to the parking lot.

"Well?" Davy asked, moving over to join me. "Learn anything?"

"Not really. He didn't even know whether Bailey had been shot. You'll probably need a necropsy."

"Huh? A what?"

"A necropsy. Most people use the term autopsy when they actually mean necropsy."

"An autopsy—necropsy—on a horse?"

"Sure. Any large veterinary facility should be able to do it. Or maybe the cops will. Who knows, it might be natural causes. Wouldn't that be amusing?"

Officer Weinstein leaned out from his window. "Detective Nunes will see you now," he said.

Nunes turned out to be a pleasant Hispanic woman, short and compact, with straight black hair and large, almond-colored eyes. A plainclothes officer, she wore a tan skirt with matching jacket over a white cotton blouse. Rather than heels, she had brown running shoes. Absently, I noted a pale line circling the ring finger of her left hand. A wedding band had been removed recently.

"Thanks for stopping in. You look better this morning, Mr. Geller."

I said, "I . . . don't handle stress well."

"You did a pretty good job yesterday. You're quite the local hero. Channel 6 and Channel 10 both ran stories on you last night."

I blinked. "I was on TV?"

"Six o'clock and eleven o'clock broadcasts."

"Slow news day," I muttered.

"Are you kidding? When a handicapped local man saves two people from a sniper, that's big stuff in Philly. They ran an interview with Mr. Hunt. He told how you single-handedly dragged Bobby Goldsmith and him to cover behind the dead horse, then risked your life to try to save the boy's stepfather. It doesn't get much better than that."

I gave Davy an I'll-kill-you-later look. The last thing I wanted was to be featured on television. On two channels, yet.

"Uh . . . I don't remember much," I said. "It happened so fast, it's a blur."

"Your modesty is refreshing, Mr. Geller. This way."

Turning, she led us through a large, high-ceilinged room full of tiny desks. A few uniformed police officers sat filling out paperwork, typing at computers, or talking on phones.

She said, "I need you to read over your statements, then sign them. That's all for today."

Her desk sat in the far corner of the room. Davy and I slid into a pair of white plastic chairs like the ones in the waiting area. A wooden stand in the shape of a pink poodle held business cards. I picked one up: Detective F. Nunes, Buckston Police, with address, phone number, and extension.

I put the card back, then stretched out my legs. My hands shook like palsy. I pressed my palms hard against my thighs. Tremens, hold the delirium. It would pass in a few minutes.

Nunes picked up clipboards with statements already typed out and handed one to each of us. In sixty-five words, mine told how Mitch Goldsmith got shot. It ended with Davy dialing 911.

"There's one detail I left out," I said. I repeated Mitch's last words.

"Tell Fifi Dows?" From her tone, I thought she recognized the name.

"Mitch was whispering. I could barely hear him. I might be mistaken on the name, though. Is Fifi a real person?"

"I don't know."

I leaned forward, gauging her reactions. "How about a Fifi? Do you know someone in the area named Fifi?"

"Let me do a quick Internet search." Nunes turned to her computer, and I watched her fingers glide across the keyboard. She read something off the monitor, typed again. I leaned to one side, but couldn't see the screen. Finally she shook her head.

"Afraid not, Mr. Geller. There's nobody named Fifi or F. Dows living in Buckston—or in any nearby town."

I had the distinct impression she was leaving something out. She hadn't given a direct answer when I'd asked if she knew anyone named Fifi.

"You do know a Fifi, though," I prodded.

An odd and somewhat hostile expression flashed across her face. Just as fast, she squelched it. I glanced at Davy. Had he noticed?

The detective snapped, "I already looked."

"Pit," Davy said in a warning tone, "don't be rude."

"Sorry, Detective." I leaned back, smiling an apology I didn't mean. "I wasn't trying to offend. I haven't had my meds—I didn't think we'd be here this long."

"Mr. Geller," she said, voice hard, "I am busy. If your statement is correct, please sign it. You too, Mr. Hunt."

I noted that she didn't ask me to add Fifi Dows to my statement. Shrugging a little, I signed and returned the clipboard. Not my problem.

"Any news about the sniper?" Davy asked. He scrawled his signature with a John Hancock flourish.

"We're following a few leads." Nunes forced a smile as though happy to steer our discussion to safe ground again. Then she pushed her chair back and stood. "Thank you for your help. If we need anything more, someone will be in touch."

I struggled to my feet. "Thanks."

Davy started for the door. I took a step, then paused.

"About the horse . . ." I said. "Bailey's Final Call? Was he shot too?"

"We had a vet examine him this morning. It appears to have been natural causes. Dr. Rothman said . . ." She rummaged around on her desk and located a yellow paper. "Death due to heart failure. Apparently, it happens with racehorses more often than people realize."

"Thanks." I turned toward the door, paused again. "Is there going to be an autopsy?"

"It's routine in a murder investigation."

"I meant on the horse."

She shrugged. "He wasn't shot, so it will be up to you or your insurance company."

"Bailey's death seems like an odd coincidence to me. Would anyone here mind if Davy had one performed?"

"As the owner, that's certainly his right. I can't imagine anyone would object." Her eyes narrowed a fraction. Was I stepping on official toes? "I'll check with the officer in charge and let you know if there's a problem."

"This isn't your case?"

"I'm working on it, but Captain Dobbs is lead investigator. Do you have a phone number where I can reach you?"

I gave her Davy's cell phone number.

"Are we done here?" I asked Davy in the parking lot. "The vet said natural causes. I want to go home."

"You win." He shrugged. "The police can find Mitch's killer. Who knows, maybe he was borrowing money from loan sharks and didn't pay up fast enough."

"Maybe." But what self-respecting loan shark would be named Fifi?

As I settled into the car seat, my brain wouldn't quit. I couldn't stop reviewing everything Nunes had told us. And I kept coming back to her reaction when I mentioned Fifi Dows.

Her first name began with F. It couldn't be that simple, could it?

"What's wrong?" Davy asked.

"Give me your phone. I want to try something."

He surrendered his cell phone. I flipped it open and, from memory, dialed the number on Nunes's business card.

A male voice answered, "Buckston Police Department."

"Is Fifi there?" I asked.

"Hang on."

A few clicks. Then I heard the someone pick up. "Officer Nunes."

I deepened my voice an octave. "Sorry, wrong number." Snapping the phone shut, I told Davy what had happened.

"Detective Nunes is Fifi?" he said. "No way!"

"Probably a nickname. If the officer on duty knew, it can't be much of a secret. No wonder she didn't add it to my official statement."

I could see him trying to connect the dots in his mind. "How would she know Mitch Goldsmith . . . ?"

"Tell Fifi what? What does 'Dows' mean?"

"Got me."

I chewed my lip. Perhaps "Dows" hadn't been a last name. Part of another word?

Davy pulled out of Visitors' Parking. I watched the passenger-side mirror as a white Mustang trailed us onto Route 202. The driver, a stocky man with a military-style crewcut and sunglasses, did not look familiar. Nor did the empty license plate holder help—unfortunately, Pennsylvania didn't require front tags.

I said, "I think we're being followed."

Moving only his eyes, Davy glanced at the rearview mirror.

"White car?" he asked.

"Yes."

He floored the accelerator and made a sharp left turn across oncoming traffic. A truck's horn blared. I heard the squeal of

brakes, but no crash followed. Davy shifted gears and sped up a twisty two-lane road, making a series of random turns. He didn't slow until we cruised down a tree-lined country lane with farms to either side.

I turned in my seat to look back. The white car had disappeared.

My memory dredged up a picture of the parking lot behind the police station. I had seen the Mustang.

"Do you think that was the killer?" Davy asked.

"Only if the killer is a cop."

He chewed that over. "Maybe Nunes put a tail on us."

"Why? Your horse died of natural causes, as far as she's concerned." I paused. "Unless she lied."

"That horse doctor— What was his name?"

"Rothman. Want me to call him?"

"Yes." He handed over his phone again, and I dialed Information. Sure enough, the operator found a number in Doylestown for Rothman's practice and put me through.

On the second ring, a woman picked up and said: "Rothman Veterinary."

I thumbed on the speakerphone so Davy could hear.

"Hi," I said. "I'm calling about Bailey's Final Call. The police said Dr. Rothman examined him?"

"Who is this? If you're another reporter . . ."

"No, ma'am. My name is Peter Geller. I—"

"Oh, I saw you on the news last night." Her manner softened noticeably. "Hold on, Mr. Geller. Dr. Rothman will be free in a moment."

Classical music began to play, tinny and small through the speaker. Davy pulled off onto a broad gravel shoulder and put the engine in neutral.

"Detective Fifi told the truth," he said.

"We'll see."

He opened his mouth, but the music cut off and a man announced, "This is Dr. Rothman. How may I help you?"

I identified myself. "David Hunt is with me," I said. "We're looking for closure about Bailey, and the police said you examined him last night?"

"That's right."

"Any idea what happened?"

He cleared his throat. "As far as I can tell, he died of heart failure. As for the *cause*—" I envisioned him shrugging on the other

end of the line. "—it could have been a previously undetected heart flaw. A virus. Or something else entirely."

"He wasn't shot?"

"There were no bullet wounds."

"What about puncture marks? Could he have been doped with something?"

Rothman gave a humorless bark of a laugh. "A racehorse is a walking pincushion. Between drawing blood, Lasix shots, inoculations, and vitamins, they get more needles than you can count. If someone doped him, you'd never notice one more hole. And half the drugs used today leave no traces behind, anyway. Could he have been drugged? Sure. Do I think he was? I doubt it."

"Did you take a blood sample? Davy wants blood work run."

"Already sent to the lab. I won't see results until tomorrow, though."

"So there's no official cause of death yet?"

"No-o-o." He drawled it out. "But, like I said, I'm sure it will come down to heart failure. I can let you know when I get the report, if that helps."

"Thanks." I gave him Davy's fax and cell phone numbers. "Please call any time with news. Mr. Hunt would like a copy of the lab results. You can bill him for it."

"Anything more?"

What else might prove helpful?

"Did you order a specific set of tests?" I asked.

"All the standard ones."

"Are there any others you can get—never mind the expense—that might catch something you'd normally miss?"

He paused. "Is there something I ought to know about Bailey's death?"

"No. At least, nothing specific. Call it a hunch. Mr. Hunt has a feeling something isn't quite right. Having Bailey and Mitch Goldsmith die together is, well, an odd coincidence. Too odd."

"There are a few more tests, but they'll add a week to the results. And they aren't cheap."

"Run them."

"Mr. Hunt will pay the bill?"

I glanced at Davy, who nodded.

"Yes," I said. "Charge it to David Hunt's credit card." I gave him Davy's AmEx number from memory. "Don't worry about costs. And if it can be expedited in any way—"

"I understand. I'll take care of it. Anything else I can help you with?"

"Do you know Mitch's friend, Fifi?"

"Afraid not. I wasn't their vet. You might ask Dr. Christiansen. His practice is in Plumstead, the next town over. Great guy."

"Thanks."

"Call if you need anything else." He hung up.

I returned Davy's phone. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, gaze distant.

"It is too much of a coincidence," he said. "Bailey was doped. I know it."

"Let's see what the lab says."

"What's our next step?"

"I need to eat. Low blood sugar is starting to bother me." I hoped it was low blood sugar.

"Want a beer with your pizza?" he asked.

It was a test, and I knew it. Would I give in to alcohol or stick it out till the end?

"Juice," I said. Pain I could live with. Shakes I could suffer in silence. I still had the bottle of aspirin in my pocket; it would have to do.

Davy smiled. "After lunch, what next?"

"Back to the scene of the crime. I want to look around the farm."

Davy's satellite navigation system steered us into the center of Doylestown. A shop-lined main street led us past the county courthouse. There weren't many restaurants to choose from, but we finally settled on a Greek diner in a strip mall. Chicken souvlaki, orange juice, and french fries took the edge off my hunger and calmed my shaking hands. The waitress gave us directions back to 202, so Davy overtipped her by ten dollars.

Twenty minutes later, we turned into Black Fox Farm, passed between the stone gateposts, and cruised up the long driveway. Today the place had a curiously deserted look, like a movie set after the actors had all gone home: no people, no horses, no signs of life anywhere. The battered horse van still sat by the exercise ring. The only other vehicles were the red convertible, now parked directly in front of the house, and a metallic purple motorcycle next to it.

Davy pulled up behind "horse kid" and climbed out. My legs felt like water, but I got them working.

Davy marched to the porch. I followed. They didn't have a doorbell, so he rapped hard on the frame. Nobody answered. We exchanged a glance.

"Try the barn," I said. "Bobby's probably taking care of the livestock."

"Want to wait in the car?"

"No." I tried the front door. The knob turned easily, so I pushed it open an inch. "I want to poke around inside."

"You can't. That's breaking and entering!"

"What breaking? Besides, I have to sit down in a comfy chair for a few minutes and rest. And didn't Mitch say I was welcome anytime?"

"Pit . . ."

"Keep the kid busy for fifteen minutes. There's something I want to check out."

Davy set off with an I-don't-like-this-idea expression. I grinned. By now he ought to understand the value of risk. Besides, wasn't I a local hero? Missy wouldn't press charges.

I pushed inside, flipped the light switch, and looked around. A tall-backed oak chair studded with coat hooks stood against the right wall, flanked by tasteful steel engravings of horsing scenes. A white ceramic umbrella stand stuffed with umbrellas sat to the left. Through the doorway straight ahead, I spotted a kitchen with 1960s-era fixtures.

A distant banging noise, over and over, came from somewhere upstairs. The breath caught in my throat. Someone else was in the house.

I crept forward, through the kitchen with its worn linoleum floor and floral wallpaper, to a tiny butler's staircase in the rear. The banging grew steadily louder. I heard faint music now too. I put my foot on the bottom step and paused, listening.

Music . . . banging . . . and faint animal grunts.

I could have slapped myself. Good thing I hadn't called Davy or the police. It had been a long time, but I still recognized the sounds of hot sex. Someone was having a good time up there. Missy, with her husband not even in the grave? No—she was in the hospital.

Bobby made more sense. The "horse kid" car out front pointed to him. And the purple motorcycle probably meant a friend. From the sounds of things, they would be busy for a while.

Chuckling to myself, I wandered through the ground floor, keeping to the throw rugs, trying to move silently. The living room had plastic-sheathed furniture, a dozen pink roses in a vase, and more tasteful horse pictures. Then, off the dining room, I found what I had been searching for: Mitch's office.

It was small and cluttered, much as I'd imagined, with a battered steel desk, a wooden filing cabinet topped with a fax machine, a small pink couch that must have been one of Missy's cast-offs . . . and stacked against the wall, four large shipping cartons.

Those interested mē. The top one had been opened; its flaps stuck up. I peeked inside at sealed plastic containers: iPods—and not cheap models, either. These had large video screens. One had been removed from its carton. I remembered Bobby's from the police station. The kid must have swiped it from this stash.

Stepping back, I estimated forty iPods per carton, a hundred and sixty total.

I turned to the desk and plopped into an old-fashioned wooden chair, then rolled forward on squeaky wheels.

A pocket-sized address book lay at hand, so I flipped to F but only found three entries. No Fifi. I flipped back to D—no Dows. Could I have misunderstood? What sounded like Dows? Tows? I tried T. Nothing.

I snapped the address book shut and slipped it into my pocket; I'd go through it at my leisure, then get it back to Missy somehow.

What about the cubbyholes? A large three-up check ledger had been tucked into one, so I pulled it out and paged to the last stub, \$3,554.00 for feed.

I worked backward. Mitch had been diligent about recording not only checks, but deposits. I could see at a glance where all his money had come from and gone. As I'd suspected, the farm barely scraped by. If not for a single big deposit from two days ago, Mitch would have been overdrawn by nearly forty thousand dollars.

Besides the usual utility and feed bills—could hay and oats cost that much?—I found a few deposit entries of interest:

BFC (1st)	\$ 75,000
R (rent)	\$ 2,500

BFC had to be Bailey's Final Call — probably Davy's down payment on the horse. Every penny had gone out the next day to pay what must have been long overdue bills.

Who or what was R? I flipped back through the stubs looking at deposit records. Sure enough, R paid his rent like clockwork on the fifteenth of every month. But what was being rented for so much money?

There were no entries for Fifi Dows, nor any combination of her initials.

I had just started looking for Mitch's insurance policy when a floorboard squeaked behind me. I swiveled in my chair.

"What are you doing?" Bobby demanded from the doorway. He wore nothing but boxer shorts done in red, white, and blue like the American flag, and to my surprise, he had not an ounce of fat on his body, from six-pack abs to sharply defined shoulders and biceps. More than anything, he looked like a Calvin Klein underwear model.

"Hi, Bobby. We knocked a bunch of times. Since the door was open, I didn't think your mother would mind if I waited inside." I grasped my cane. If he wanted to beat me to a pulp, I might not be able to stop him—but I'd try.

"Well, I mind." With two quick steps, he closed the distance between us. He loomed over me, fists tight, the mingled odors of sweat and sex rolling off his body. "Where is Mr. Hunt?"

"Out looking for you."

He stretched out his hand, and I half cringed. But instead of grabbing me, he reached past and slapped the desk shut.

"Keep out of our stuff!"

"I need the phone number for your vet—"

"Dr. Christiansen?" He hesitated. "What for?"

"Davy wants an autopsy performed on Bailey."

His fists unclenched. "You're too late. Valley Protein picked him up this morning."

"Who?"

"Valley Protein—the disposal company."

"What! Who gave them permission?"

"I did. After I checked with the police."

I blinked. "You mean Detective Nunes?"

"Yes."

My breath caught in my throat. Nunes had told us that we could order an autopsy, but if she'd already given permission for the horse to be disposed of . . .

Maybe I had the timeline wrong.

I said, "When did you talk to her about it? This morning?"

"Yeah. At the police station."

So much for that idea. She had to be covering something up, just like she'd held out on her name. She had pushed the "accidental death" theory a little too hard for my satisfaction.

Bobby went on, "It's summer. You can't leave a dead horse lying around. Bailey was already attracting turkey vultures. Oh! Hang on." He stepped from the room, then returned a moment later with a folded-up piece of paper, which he handed to me.

It was a bill for two hundred and fifty dollars, a disposal fee to remove Bailey's Final Call. It had the company name and phone number. Davy would have to call and stop them from doing whatever they did with dead horses. Dog food?

"Since Bailey is yours," Bobby said, arms folded, "I think you guys should pay for it. I paid them cash this afternoon."

"Of course." I forced another smile. "I'll give it to Davy. He'll take care of it. I think he has his checkbook." Rising, I stuck the bill in my pocket, then limped toward the door. There I paused. "Why so many iPods?"

"We sell them on eBay."

"Ah." Perhaps a side business, begun to keep food on the table in leaner times. It might even be more successful than horse farming, aside from flukes like Bailey.

"Want a deal?" He pulled one from the open box—a white iPod with a large video screen, sealed in heavy plastic. "A hundred and twenty. That's better than wholesale."

"I don't listen to music."

He frowned and thrust it into my hands anyway. The room seesawed. I gazed past Bobby at the door. I had to get out.

"It's more than music," he said, pushing closer. He jabbed at the package with one finger. I jumped. "See here? It plays audio-books, podcasts, TV shows, and movies. Everything you need is inside. It's a sweet deal. You should take it."

His voice sounded impossibly far away now, as though at the end of a long tunnel. My vision began to dim at the corners of my eyes, narrowing in on just his face.

Another panic attack was coming. I had to get out of here.

"Well?" he demanded.

Gulping hard, I nodded. *Buy the damn thing.* He'd back off. I could get away.

"Credit? Card?" I tried to sound normal.

"I gotta charge you an extra two percent."

"Uh-huh."

I fumbled for my wallet. My hands shook so much, I dropped everything. Credit cards, organ donor card, and driver's license spilled across the floor.

"I'll get it," he said, bending and scooping everything back into place except my Visa card. "This one?"

"Uh . . . huh . . ."

He found an old-fashioned charge machine in a desk drawer, loaded a credit slip, and ran my card through. As he filled out the total with a stub of a pencil, my eyes kept drifting toward the doorway. I could make a break for it—

Bobby grinned, suddenly too close, almost in my face. "You'll love it. Trust me. I just need an e-mail address . . ."

Babbling something incoherent, I hugged the iPod and hurried through the doorway. I'd be all right once I got outside. Down the hall, through the kitchen. My legs tried to buckle. I struggled to lock my knees.

Floorboards squeaked behind me. *Keep moving.* The hair on the back of my neck prickled. *Don't look.* Another step. A trickle of sweat ran down my left side, leaving a cold trail. Another step. I could hear Bobby breathing.

In a sudden rush, I shouldered the front door open and burst onto the porch. *Free.* I clutched the railing, gasping, eyes wide.

The world stopped closing in. The earth stopped rolling. My chest grew lighter and I could breathe.

"Are you okay?" Bobby asked, still behind me. "Mr. Geller?"

"I'll—I'll be all right. Give me a minute . . ."

Where had Davy gotten off to? I couldn't see him anywhere. I had to distract the kid before he went looking.

My attention focused on the front steps. A little accident should do it.

I worked my way over to the top step, hanging onto the railing with my right hand, and started down to the yard. On the second step, I let my knees buckle. With a yelp of fear, I dropped my cane and the iPod and pitched forward. My grip on the railing kept me from tumbling to the ground, so I hung half suspended in air. I could either be saved or—if necessary—save myself, depending on what Bobby did.

Teetering, I gave a very authentic moan.

Bare feet pounded on the porch. A second later, a hand

grabbed my shoulder and hauled me back. *Saved*. Good kid, all right. My first impression hadn't been wrong.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Bobby said.

"I . . . don't think so. Not much." How far could I play up my "accident" without him getting suspicious? "I thought I was going to break my neck!"

"Good thing I was here."

I searched his face. Concern, maybe a hint of pity. Best he should view me as a harmless old cripple.

Looping my arm across his neck and shoulder, he helped me down the steps, then went back for my cane. I leaned on it harder than I needed to. Then he retrieved my iPod.

"It's not broken or anything," he said, brushing off the plastic packaging. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

"Can I get you anything? A glass of water, maybe?"

"No . . . just let me rest for a minute." I wiped at my face. God, I was soaked with sweat.

"Want to come back inside?"

"I . . . I don't think I can make it up the steps."

He looked relieved. Instead, I nodded at the lawn chairs Mitch had placed under the huge oak. Nobody had put them away.

"Help me over there?"

"Sure."

He steadied my arm as I hobbled across and sat hard. My hands still trembled. I exaggerated it to good effect. No sign of Davy yet.

"You better get dressed," I told him. "Your mother would have a fit if she saw you outside like that."

"Yeah." Without another word, he turned and ran back to the house. The front door banged. I imagined him throwing the deadbolts.

Davy was just returning from the barns. Perfect timing.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"Nah. The barn by the house has a bunch of horses inside. That old guy, Carl, was cleaning out the stalls."

"What old guy?"

"You saw him—he was at the exercise ring with Mitch when we got here yesterday."

"Thin, fifty-five or so, bib overalls and a Phillies baseball cap?"

"That's Carl. I asked him about the murder. He said he was

giving a riding lesson and didn't hear anything. He didn't know anything had happened till the police and ambulance showed up."

"I'm not surprised. I think we can safely cross him off as a suspect. The little girl too. What about the other barn?"

"It's padlocked, so I couldn't get inside to check it out. How about you? Have any luck?"

"Yep." I grinned and patted my pocket. "I swiped Mitch's address book. Unfortunately, the kid surprised me rifling through the office desk. I thought he was going to punch me out, so I made a strategic withdrawal."

"Ran away, you mean."

"Something like that." I glanced at the house and noted a shadow at one of the dining room windows. That had to be Bobby. A second shadow drifted over to him—the girlfriend, no doubt.

Wouldn't it be amusing if his girlfriend turned out to be Detective Fifi? Her wedding ring had been recently removed. And with Bobby's tight little body, who could blame her for a little cradle-robbing?

"Well, what did you expect?" Davy chuckled. "I would have punched you out in his position. How come he didn't answer when I knocked?"

"He didn't hear you. He had a girl upstairs, and they were going at it hot and heavy."

"So we've hit another dead end."

"I almost forgot! I have the address book, and I've got a couple of presents for you." I fished out the Valley Protein bill. "The kid had Bailey picked up this morning. You'd better call the removal company and save Bailey from the dog food factory. You might still want an autopsy, depending on the blood results. I bet they have a freezer where they can store him for you. Of course, it'll cost a bit . . ."

He pulled out his phone and began to dial. "What next? Are we done here?"

"Not quite." I handed him the iPod. "Happy birthday."

"Uh. Thanks. But it's not my birthday yet."

"Four months, two days early. Close enough." Rising, I started for the path around the house. "I want to see the scene of the crime again."

Davy talked Valley Protein into putting Bailey's Final Call on

ice pending the insurance company's investigation. Apparently it wasn't that odd or unusual of a request. Fifty bucks a day took care of everything.

Bailey might have been carted off, but even without my trick memory, I would have known the spot where he had lain from the flattened grass. A small, rust-colored stain marked where Mitch had fallen.

Closing my eyes, I replayed yesterday's murder.

Bailey on the ground.

Bobby across the horse's neck.

Mitch facing us as blood colored the silver letters of his shirt . . .

I crossed to Mitch's last standing position and turned around. With Bailey in front of me, the first barn to my right, the second barn directly behind me, and Davy slightly to my left . . . a bullet from the woods would have hit me in my side.

But Mitch had been shot in the back.

I turned and stared at Barn number 2, with its dark red paint, the hex sign under the eaves, and the peeling white trim. It had no windows, but this close I noticed gaps between side boards. And the second-story hayloft had doors, one of which sat open a foot. A sniper could have shot Mitch from up there. Maybe even from the roof.

In my mind, I replayed the loud *crack* of the shot, but couldn't tell where it had originated. Even the slight echo as the sound bounced back from the main house offered no significant help.

Turning, I faced the woods. Yellow crime-scene tape flapped in the faint breeze.

"What's all that?" I asked Davy, pointing with my cane.

"The cops found a rifle shell over there. The sniper lay in the grass to take his shot."

"When did they find it? Yesterday?"

"Yeah. They had twenty people combing the area. Why?"

"Someone planted that shell. The shot came from the barn."

"You're sure?"

"Do you need to ask?"

He shrugged. "Okay. Now what? Back to Detective Fifi? The police should be told—"

I snorted. "For all we know, she was the sniper. What better way of escaping? She could just blend in with the police going over the farm?"

He gaped. "You don't really think—"

"No, I'm just babbling. But nothing would surprise me these days."

"So what's our next move?"

"I want to go shopping. I want a real shirt with buttons." As I said it, I studied the second barn. Davy hadn't gotten a peek inside. But now I wanted to see its contents. "After dark, we'll come back with a bolt cutter. *That* will be breaking and entering."

"Pit . . ." He shook his head.

"No one will press charges if we're caught."

"When we're caught, you mean."

Movement from the house caught my eye. Bobby, still in his patriotic boxers, had stepped onto the small back porch. He leaned on the railing and stared at us.

"We've got an audience," I muttered. "Quick, act natural."

Davy glanced over his shoulder and waved. Bobby gave a curt nod, turned, and stalked back inside. A not-so-subtle hint for us to get out.

Then, from the front of the house, I heard the roar of a motorcycle engine.

"Let's get out of here," I said, starting for the front yard.

When we reached the BMW, the purple bike was gone. Somehow, I couldn't picture Detective Fifi on it.

We spent the rest of the afternoon running errands. Doylestown didn't have a hardware store, or we couldn't find it, so K-Mart supplied two small but powerful flashlights and a bolt cutter, which Davy thought would nip off the padlock with little difficulty.

Muttering, "Now for a shirt," I started for the clothing department.

"Are you out of your mind?" Davy caught my arm.

"Forget designer labels." He had been fussy about his appearance in college, and dating a model had only made things worse. "Clothes are clothes. Let's get 'em while we're here."

"Bad enough I'm wearing a grocery-store T-shirt. No way am I buying the rest of my wardrobe here."

I shrugged. "It's your money."

"Damn right!"

We paid for the tools and left. To the annoyance of drivers

behind us, Davy stuck to the speed limit on Route 202. That probably attracted more notice than speeding would have. Not that I could point it out.

As we neared the outlet stores and whatever garments Davy considered suitable for an evening of crime, I watched the road. Twice police cars cruised past in the opposite direction. Neither slowed to check us out.

Fifteen minutes later, we came to our Best Western. Davy kept going, and soon a couple of strip malls appeared. I took in the signs. Orvis . . . Bose . . . Mikasa . . . Davy would be in his element here.

We parked in front of an Urban Safari. After my usual moans and groans from being cramped up, which Davy ignored, I followed him in.

The place had a weird retro-safari vibe going. Images of lions and giraffes superimposed over skyscrapers, while yuppies and dinks fished from the roofs of Audis. Yep, Davy's sort of place.

Skirting high-tech silver mannequins, I made a beeline for the clearance rack. Sometimes it pays to be small and thin. Sure enough, I found a bunch of markdowns in my size. Soft fabrics and earthy colors suited me, so I picked out three presentable shirts in various shades of brown and two pairs of brown pants. I left them at the checkout counter with a bubblegum-chewing girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen, then wandered over to check on Davy. He could pay for everything and haul it out to the car.

"What would Cree say?" I asked. He was holding up olive green shorts covered with what must have been two dozen pockets with heavy steel zippers. "Are pockets 'in' this year?"

"I do fashion fine by myself." He put the zippered pants back quickly though. "What about you? Find any clothes you want?"

"Lots. My stuff's waiting at checkout. I'm done."

"But you haven't tried anything on!"

"Everything will fit."

He shook his head, turned to the rack, and pulled out a pair identical to the last, only dusty blue. Then he put those back and pulled out burnt-orange shorts with coils of chains hanging from every seam. A Goth nightmare. Did he intend to go through every garment? Better him than me.

I said, "I'll be sitting out front. Call me if you need me."

"Okay."

I pushed through the door and into the heat again. The sun

had moved enough to put the bench in shadow. The deep warmth of the wood felt soothing against my back.

Settling down as comfortably as I could, I flipped open Mitch's black address book. It contained little more than names and phone numbers, beginning with "Abramson, Eli and Faye" and ending with "Zensen, Jon." I started from the beginning.

No patterns emerged, though I learned the names and addresses of their priest, their church choir director, and dozens of friends and relatives. As an added bonus, it had all the companies with which Mitch did business: feed stores, hardware companies, racetracks, horse trailer rentals, that sort of thing. He even knew a blacksmith.

Then I stopped cold. Fifi Nunes's name almost leaped off the page. Mitch had listed her under P for "Police." And he had two numbers for her, the office number and a cell phone number.

I could have slapped myself for not checking under P first. Her listing came before "Det. Arthur Dawson." She had extension 127, and Dawson had 128. Adjoining desks? Partners?

"Tell Fifi Dows" could have meant, "Tell Fifi and Dawson." Mitch had barely been able to speak. Or maybe "Daws" rather than "Dows" . . . "Daws" could have been a nickname.

But tell them what? That he'd been shot? Or something more?

I looked up, gaze unfocused, trying to think it through logically. Mitch . . . Bobby . . . Missy . . . too much didn't make sense yet.

A motorcycle roared down the highway right in front of me. A metallic purple motorcycle.

My attention snapped to it. I scrambled to my feet.

It was the same one I'd seen next to Bobby's convertible. I would have sworn to it. And the rider wasn't a girl, it was a young man—very thin, like Bobby, almost elfin. His unbuttoned shirt hung open and flapping in the breeze, leaving his bare chest exposed.

There was no mistaking his sex.

I sat. No wonder Bobby had reacted so violently when he found me in the house. I'd almost outed him. His reaction made a lot more sense now. And so much for Detective Fifi being his girlfriend.

I peeked in the Urban Safari's window. Davy browsed past, a blood-red shirt in one hand, but nothing else yet. He had such an intense expression, I almost laughed. If little old ladies got in his way, he'd mow them down.

Returning to my seat, I finished reading through the address book. No more Fifis. No Dows. It came back to the two detectives, Nunes and Dawson.

Maybe Mitch knew them socially—through church, or the Elks Club, or the Rotarians. But he'd put them under "Police." All his social contacts went in under their last names.

Returning to the P section, I studied the entries. Every other P name had been alphabetized, from Sara Paul to Tom Purdom, as though copied from a previous address book. Fifi Nunes and Arthur Dawson came last, added more recently than the others.

Half an hour later, in the car heading back to the Best Western, I filled Davy in on the purple motorcycle.

"Huh," was all he said.

Then I told him what I'd discovered in Mitch's book. He pursed his lips and nodded.

"Detective Fifi knows a lot more than she's saying," he added. "She's been lying to us all along."

"Not technically. She doesn't *know* any Fifis. She is a Fifi. And there probably aren't any others in the area."

"Lying by omission is still lying."

"Kinda." I yawned. "What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Almost six."

"It should be dark enough by eleven to hit the farm. Assuming they keep early hours . . ."

"How about dinner?"

"Maybe a nap first, then dinner. I'm exhausted."

The Best Western appeared. Davy turned into the parking lot and circled to the left.

I sat up straight. Parked directly in front of our door sat the white Mustang that had followed us from the Buckston police station. The driver with the crewcut and the sunglasses leaned against the passenger side, arms folded, face expressionless. He stood as we neared.

"Want to bet he's Fifi's partner?" I whispered.

"No." Davy pulled into the space on the other side of the Mustang. He didn't cut the engine.

Sunglasses Man stalked around the car.

"David Hunt?" he asked. He pulled a badge from his pocket and held it up. "Buckston Police."

"Detective Dawson?" Davy countered.

"Yes." Dawson reached past Davy, turned the key in the BMW's ignition, and pulled it out. He dropped it into his breast pocket. Then, in an emotionless voice, he said, "May I see your operator's license and vehicle registration, sir." It was not a question.

Davy blanched but pulled out his driver's license. The convertible's registration was in the glove compartment. I retrieved it.

Dawson took everything to his Mustang, climbed inside, and spoke into a radio handset. Slowly, Davy sank in his seat as though trying to disappear.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's not like this car is stolen."

Davy didn't answer.

"Is it?"

"Oh, shut up!"

When the detective came back, he held a small clipboard. The kind that held traffic tickets.

"Mr. Hunt," he said, "were you aware of an oncoming truck when you made a turn across traffic on Route 202 this morning?"

"Yes," Davy said. "I didn't know who you were, and—"

The detective cut him off. "I am issuing a citation for reckless driving. You endangered the lives of other motorists. I suggest you take more care on our roads in the future. Sign here."

"Can't you let us off with a warning, officer?" I asked.

"Not this time."

"Where do you want me to sign?" Davy asked.

Dawson jabbed a finger at the bottom of the clipboard. Without another peep, Davy scrawled his name. Dawson tore off the ticket and handed it over, along with Davy's keys.

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but Davy sank even lower in his seat.

"Excuse me," I said.

"What?"

"Are you Fifi Nunes's partner?"

"We sometimes work together. It depends on the case."

"On Mitch Goldsmith's case?"

"We are both assisting Captain Dobbs with that investigation, yes."

"No, Mitch's other case."

He hesitated, studying me. I wished I could have seen his eyes.

"I cannot discuss ongoing investigations," he said.

Interesting.

"I understand—and I'm not trying to interfere." I paused. "It's just that before he died, Mitch Goldsmith gave me this message—"

"What message?"

"He said, 'Tell Fifi and Daws,' mumbled a few words I couldn't quite understand, and passed out." Partly a lie, but it ought to catch Dawson's interest. "He called you Daws?"

"My friends do."

So Dawson considered Mitch a friend. Interesting.

"Do you have any more news about Missy? Is she still in the hospital?"

"She should be home now. Mitch's viewing is at ten o'clock tomorrow morning at the Himmelbach Funeral Home."

Davy asked, "That's in Buckston?"

"On Route 202. You won't have trouble finding it."

"Thanks."

Dawson stepped back. "Drive safely, sir."

It was closer to eleven thirty that night when we reached Black Fox Farm. Davy cut the headlights as he pulled into the driveway, coasting through the poplars and birches, then onto the grass. Crickets burred in the grass, and something small to our left made a rustling sound in the bushes. A raccoon, or maybe the eponymous fox.

"I can go alone, if you want," Davy said.

"Not a chance."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

I twisted in my seat, but couldn't see Route 202. We'd be safe from Fifi or Daws if they happened past. Anyone leaving the house would spot us at once, of course, but it was late enough that everyone should be in for the night.

Davy passed me a flashlight. I didn't turn it on; my eyes were growing used to the dark. With the moon up and a faint glow shining in from streetlights on the highway, I could get to the barn.

Davy climbed out, and I did the same. The clicks of our doors shutting sounded like gunshots in the night. As we walked up the driveway, feet crunching softly on the gravel, I spotted two dim lights in the farmhouse windows, one on the second floor—probably a bedroom—and one deep in the

ground floor. The kitchen? A yellow bug light cast a dim glow across the front porch.

Like a cat, Davy padded down the path between the house and stables, making no sounds at all. I clunked along after him. Between my shuffling walk, gasps for breath, and occasional loud tap as my cane struck something hard, I felt like the world's most incompetent burglar.

At last, panting, I caught up with Davy at the second barn. He pulled out the bolt cutter.

"Light?" he said.

I thumbed on my flashlight and aimed it at the door. I found a handle and two metal brackets for a padlock, but the lock itself was gone. We exchanged a glance.

"We should come back in an hour," I whispered. "Might be someone inside."

"Shh!" He pressed his ear to the door. I strained to listen. Nothing.

"Risk versus reward," he muttered. "Isn't that what you keep saying?"

He pulled the door open a foot, hinges squealing, and a band of yellow light caught me. It wasn't all that bright, but after the darkness, it seemed piercing.

Blinking and shading my eyes, I retreated a few steps. If bullets came flying, I didn't want to catch one.

Davy darted inside. I counted to ten. Then ten more. Finally Davy stuck his head out.

"No one here. Come on."

I followed him inside, and he pulled the door shut behind us. A bare yellow bulb, maybe sixty watts, dangled from a cord overhead. The hard-packed dirt floor had been swept clean, and the walls had been painted white in the not-too-distant past. Stalls to the left held storage—boxes of all sizes, a stack of rusting bicycles and bicycle parts, wooden pallets. In the center of the room stood a huge riding lawnmower with still-green clippings on its blades. To the right sat a dusty workbench covered with ancient computers, hard drives, cases, and parts.

Nothing terribly incriminating—about what you'd expect to find in a barn these days. Then I noticed a ladder leading up to the hayloft. I nudged Davy and pointed.

"Take a look upstairs. Maybe the rifle's there."

"Okay." He set down his tools, went to the ladder, and climbed out of sight.

I wandered around the lawnmower and came to the rear wall. It took a moment, but I realized it wasn't the back of the building. A section of the barn had been fixed up professionally, and two steel security doors, the kind you'd normally find on the outside of a house, faced in at me.

Both doors had peepholes, so I peeped into the first. Even backwards, I knew peepholes worked, distorting images smaller instead of larger. I saw only blackness though. There was no light source inside.

I tried the knob, and it turned. Risk versus reward. Taking a deep breath, I pushed into a dark room, switched on my flashlight, and swept its beam across an unmade twin-sized bed, a night table with a 1950s-era lamp, a battered oak dresser with a round Art Deco mirror, and a bookcase holding ribbons and trophies. Posters on the walls showed horses.

I pulled the door shut, then crossed to the bookcase. Aside from a couple of small soccer cups, the trophies were all horse related. Dates ran back twelve years. The kid must have been born in the saddle.

Next I moved to the dresser. A half dozen pictures in cheap frames showed Bobby with various horses in the winner's circle, often with his mother and another man I didn't recognize. No pictures of Mitch, but then, Mitch was his stepfather.

What did Bobby read for pleasure? I poked through a pile of magazines on the floor by the bed. *Blood Sport*, *Equestrian Times*, and *Fast Ride* mingled with tech magazines like *Alt.2600*, *E-mail Today*, and *Wired*.

No real surprises. I returned to the barn's main room and eased the door shut. When I turned, I saw the second steel door now standing ajar. Seeping around the edges came the bright, flickering glow of a television.

Cold prickled at the back of my neck. Bobby must have been inside. Had he seen Davy? Had he seen me? He'd almost struck me in the house. What would he do if he caught me here?

"Don't move!"

Something hard jabbed the center of my back. I stiffened.

"Bobby?"

"Mr. Geller?"

I shuffled around, leaning hard on my cane, trying to look as old and feeble and helpless as possible. It had worked in the house, even if it cost me the price of an iPod.

Bobby still wore those red, white, and blue boxers, but with

a gray U.S. Air Force T-shirt and flip-flops. And he held a rusted pitchfork leveled at my back. He had poked me with one of the prongs.

"Are you crazy? Put that thing down!" I said as loud as I could, trying for a parental Voice of Authority. It came out more as a Squeak of Discomfort.

"Shut up!" Bobby snapped. "I'm sick of you spying on me!"

The wild look in his eyes alarmed me more than anything else. If he thought I was spying, what would he do if he found Davy upstairs?

I had to buy more time.

"There's been another shooting," I blurted out.

"Shut up!"

Then a voice from beyond the lawnmower broke in: "Pit! Where are you?"

It was Davy. He stood in the doorway, peering at us like he'd just arrived. He must have heard my warning. But how had he gotten outside? The loft doors had to be fifteen feet above the ground.

"Over here!" I waved and started in his direction as fast as I could. Bobby hesitated.

"Wait!" the kid finally cried. He lowered the pitchfork and ran to catch up. "Who did you say was shot?"

Too late. He'd told me more with his answer than he'd intended.

"No one was shot," I said. "You scared me with the pitchfork. It was the first thing I thought of."

"Oh." He actually looked relieved.

I joined Davy. "I found him," I said. "He was here, just like his mother said he would be."

"Did you ask him your question?" Davy said.

I blinked. Question?

"What question?" Bobby asked, staring at me.

Think fast. "About Detective Nunes," I said. "She told us yesterday morning, after you left, that Davy could get an autopsy done on Bailey. But you said she gave you permission to dispose of him before we got there. It's been bothering me."

"Maybe it was my second trip to the police station, not the first. I wasn't paying attention."

"Second trip?"

"Yeah. I brought papers to my mother at the hospital. She signed her statement for Detective Nunes, then I dropped it off."

That was right after lunch. She must have given me permission then."

"Oh," I said. "That explains it."

Davy said, "Come on. Let's get to the motel."

We left Bobby standing in the doorway, still holding his pitchfork.

My mouth went dry and I shook all over when we reached the BMW. I could have used a drink—beer, whiskey, anything alcoholic.

Davy put the car in gear, made a U-turn, and pulled out fast. He flipped on the headlights when we hit the highway.

"Thanks for the warning," he said. "I was about to climb down when I heard you talking to Bobby."

"How did you get outside?"

"There's a big nail below the loft doors. I hooked my belt onto it and eased myself down. That only left a five-foot drop. Of course, I couldn't get my belt back—I left it hanging there."

"We'll get it tomorrow."

"So, aren't you going to ask me what I found?"

I looked at him. "You found something?"

"Take a look at this!" He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a shell casing with a handkerchief. It was about three quarters of an inch long and shiny brass.

"Where was it?"

"In the corner, where the ceiling slopes down almost to the floor. You wouldn't see it normally, but my flashlight picked it out."

"Good job." It confirmed my theory about the shooter being in the second barn. "I don't suppose you saw a rifle?"

"No sign of one."

It had been a lot to hope for.

"What next?" Davy said.

"We speak to Detective Fifi again. First thing in the morning. Then we'll have to attend Mitch's viewing at the funeral parlor."

"You know who did it, don't you?"

I shrugged. "My list of suspects is narrowing."

"Dawson?" Davy probably had visions of his reckless driving ticket being thrown out by a sympathetic judge.

"I think it was Bobby."

"No way!" he said. "He was with us when it happened. And he's just a kid."

"He may not have pulled the trigger, but I know he's involved. As for being a kid . . ." I remembered the trophies in his bedroom. The dates had gone back twelve years. If he'd started riding competitively at age ten, how old would that make him? "He's in his twenties. Maybe his mid twenties."

"No way!" he said again.

"You're only saying that because he's small. But think about it. Jockeys are always small. Give him a youthful face, and I can see how he'd pass for a teenager. Especially when he wants to." As he'd clearly done for our benefit. And probably for the police's.

"But why?"

"I don't know, yet. And the hard part will be proving it. He covered everything pretty well."

We returned to the Best Western and spent an uneventful night. As usual, Davy was up with the sun the next morning, showering and bustling around our room. Even with the pillow over my head, I could hear his damn cheerful whistling.

"Will you cut that out?" I snarled.

He laughed. "Want a Dr Pepper? You need some caffeine."

I mumbled obscenities into the mattress. But finally I roused myself enough to sit up.

An hour later, after a truly wretched breakfast of burnt toast, bitter coffee, and runny scrambled eggs at a nearby diner, I borrowed his cell phone. Almost nine o'clock—time to contact Detective Fifi.

I punched in her number, asked for her extension, and on the third ring she picked up.

"Officer Nunes," she said.

"Good morning," I said. "This is Peter Geller. May David Hunt and I stop by and see you this morning?"

"What about?"

"We have some new information about Mitch Goldsmith's murder."

She hesitated. "When?"

"How about now?"

"Fine. I'm free for the next half hour."

We made it to the Buckston Police Station in record time. The officer at the window called Detective Fifi for us, and she ush-

ered us to her desk. I settled into my chair.

"You said you have information?" Nunes moved straight to business. I liked that.

"Yes," I said, "but first I have a question. Did you give Bobby permission to dispose of Bailey's Final Call?"

She looked startled. "Certainly not. Did he—?"

"He tried. We stopped the disposal company. The horse is being held on ice for us."

"Good."

Davy said, "Why didn't you tell us you and your partner were the Fifi and Daws that Mitch referred to?"

She looked away. "Because we didn't know if you'd murdered him. You insured Bailey's Final Call for two million dollars, after all. That's a lot of motive."

I looked at Davy, who shifted uncomfortably. A Midas touch indeed.

"Davy's worth a hell of a lot more than that," I said.

"We know now. But we didn't at the time. And it would have wrapped things up nicely if you two had been guilty. Daws pressed to have you picked up and questioned, but Captain Dobbs said we needed more evidence."

That had to be why Dawson followed us in his car. When Davy gave him the slip, he'd gotten pissed off and staked out our room at the Best Western.

"So who did shoot Mitch?" Davy asked.

"Bobby would have been our chief suspect, but he has the pair of you for his alibi."

"Right," I said. "Your other investigation makes him the natural suspect, of course."

Surprise crossed her face. "How—"

"The same way I know your first name is Fifi and Dawson likes to be called Daws." Why not embroider the truth a little? I leaned forward and dropped my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I have Mitch's diary."

"Let me have it," she said.

"Nothing doing," Davy said. He picked up fast. "After the way Dawson bushwacked me at the motel, I half suspect he shot Mitch!"

Nunes sighed. "What did he do?"

"Camped out and waited for me." Davy pulled out his ticket and handed it over. "Just because I out-drove him yesterday. For all we knew, he was the sniper and meant to pick us off!"

She sighed and stuck the ticket in a desk drawer. "I'll take care of it," she said. "Daws has quite a temper, and he isn't having a great week. I'm sure he didn't mean to take it out on you."

"Thanks." I nudged Davy. "Give her the casing."

He pulled out his handkerchief and passed it over.

"What's this?" she asked, unfolding it.

I told her my theory that the shooter had been in the second barn, and Davy told how he'd found the shell casing in the loft. I filled in extra details, like Bobby's reaction when he discovered me.

"I really thought he was going to run me through with the pitchfork," I said.

"You're lucky he didn't. He's been arrested several times for assault."

No surprise there. "What happened?"

"The charges were dropped. Bobby paid off everyone he beat up."

"But where did he get that much money?" I wondered aloud.

"That's what Mitch wanted to know." Fifi shook her head. "No visible means of support, and he spends cash like a Saudi prince. Can't be legal."

At last, a clue to their investigation. If Mitch had tipped off the police about Bobby, would that be enough motive for Bobby to kill him?

Probably not. Bobby had only gotten violent with me when I'd stepped on his toes, first in the house and then in the barn. It sounded like Mitch had been treading very carefully around him. No, I had missed something. Something big.

"What about the barn?" Davy asked. "Can you get a search warrant?"

"Based on one shell casing? Probably not. It could have been up there for months."

"You will check it for fingerprints though?"

"Of course."

"And you do believe me about the shooter?"

"Yes. But there's a big difference between belief and proof. And Bobby is hardly going to confess, is he?"

"No." At least, not without proper motivation.

"How old is Bobby?" Davy asked.

"Twenty-six."

"Huh. I would have sworn he was in his teens."

I gave Davy an I-told-you-so glance.

"Here." I reached into my pocket and pulled out Mitch's little black book. "It's not quite a diary, but you might as well have it." I could remember every entry on every page, anyway.

Nunes took it, leafed through, then sat back and laughed. "You're sharp," she said. At least she was a good sport; Daws probably would have pounded me into the floor. "You bluffed me completely. Did you get the information you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Who do you think killed Mitch?"

"I don't think, I know. Bobby set it up. I'd bet money his boyfriend pulled the trigger." I thought of the man on the metallic purple motorcycle. If only we knew his name.

Nunes stared at me. "Boyfriend?"

"Didn't you know? Bobby's gay."

"No, I didn't know. But that's not a sign of guilt these days. The courts need proof. Physical evidence, or a confession."

I nodded at the shell casing. "There you go."

"We already have a well-documented crime scene with another shell casing, a body impression, and a clear line-of-sight to the crime scene."

"All planted," I said. "I'm an eyewitness. The way Mitch was standing, the bullet couldn't have hit him in the back unless it came from the barn."

"Don't get me wrong—I believe you. But that's not enough for me to act."

"I see." I bit my lip. How much more did she need?

"Mitch's viewing starts at ten o'clock," she went on. "I thought I'd make an early appearance. Want a ride over?"

"We'll follow you," I said. I looked at Davy, who nodded.

When she turned to get her purse from the bookcase in back of her chair, I scooped up the shell casing. The way things were going, I didn't want to let it out of my sight just yet.

The Himmelbach Funeral Home was a sprawling Victorian mansion with additions to both sides. It was just after ten o'clock, and mourners had already begun to arrive. Good thing I had dressed in dark colors. Davy looked out of place in his yellow shorts and shirt.

Mitch's coffin sat in the back of a large room. He must have been well liked; dozens of wreaths, vases of flowers, and floral displays surrounded him. Missy, dressed all in black, sat up front

and wept. Bobby had his arm around her shoulders. His dark suit looked fresh from the tailor.

We joined the line of mourners passing Mitch for one last look. The woman ahead of me crossed herself, then turned to Missy, whispering condolences. Davy and I followed Detective Fifi to the second row of seats.

That's when Bobby spotted us. His eyes narrowed slightly, but he gave a nod in our direction. Then he excused himself from his mother and made his way over to us.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "It means a lot to my mother. She's very religious."

I said, "That's what makes this so much harder."

"What?"

"You remember Officer Nunes?"

He nodded to her. "Of course."

"She's here to arrest your mother for Mitch's murder."

"Are you crazy?" His voice rose, and heads began to turn in our direction. Missy wept on, not listening, not caring.

"Mr. Geller—" Nunes began quickly. I hushed her with a gesture.

"You see," I continued, "I found this when I was in your house yesterday." I produced the shell casing. Bobby stared at it. "This one came from the bullet that killed Mitch. Officer Nunes already had the crime lab do a match on it. And since your mother was the only one in the house at the time—"

"Shut up!" His voice dropped to a whisper, but his hands balled into fists. I could see that rage building inside him. "Shut up! It wasn't her!"

"It couldn't have been anyone else."

"Shut up!"

Nunes must have picked up on what I was doing. She said, "Your mother was too smart for her own good. She must have been planning it for a long time. After all, she set up a fake blind for the sniper, complete with a fake shell casing. That's premeditated. All that insurance on Mitch—quite a motive. It makes us wonder about her first husband's death too."

"My dad died of cancer!"

"That's what we were told." Her voice hardened. "But now we're not so sure."

I added, "Wasn't he insured too?"

Bobby pressed his fists to his ears. His eyes flicked from one of us to another.

"She's looking at life in jail," I added, "if she doesn't get the death penalty."

With a shriek of rage, he leaped at me.

"Look out!" a man's voice shouted from somewhere behind me. "He's got a knife!"

Only Bobby didn't have a knife. It was a lie.

Time seemed to slow. As Bobby hung in the air, two shots rang out. Then, instead of fists, dead weight slammed into me. My chair started to tip, but Davy and Nunes were on their feet, grabbing us, trying to hold Bobby off of me.

Cringing, I rolled to the side and fell between two folding chairs. The floor came up with bone-jarring force.

I found myself staring into Bobby's face. Shock, hate, and pain filled it. And disbelief.

Everyone in the room began to shout and run. Missy screamed.

I tilted my head back. The shooter—I focused on the last row of seats.

It wasn't Bobby's boyfriend, but Dawson. He lowered his gun, then sat heavily in a folding chair. He didn't look at any of us.

"Dawson shot him," Bobby screamed out so everyone could hear. "Dawson shot my stepfather! Dawson shot him!"

Davy and Nunes wrestled Bobby up and into my chair. He clutched at his left shoulder. Blood poured between his fingers, dripping all over. Davy applied pressure to the wound. Nunes headed for her partner.

"It was Dawson!" Bobby was still screaming when my head drooped to the floor. Everything went black.

Some time later, I woke in a hospital room. I tried to move, but couldn't. My left arm was in a cast. I must have broken it when I fell.

"Hey!" Davy leaped to his feet and hurried to my side. "How you doing?"

"What happened?" I demanded.

"Two fractures, forearm and collarbone."

Great. I'd be laid up for months.

"What about Bobby?" I asked.

"Dawson shot him."

"Yeah, I saw. Is he—?"

"Alive, yeah. He was lucky. He took one bullet in the shoul-

der, and the other grazed his neck. He couldn't talk fast enough."

I struggled to sit up. Davy leaned over, pressed the button on my bed's remote control, and raised the back for me.

"But what happened?" I said. "Spill it!"

"I hardly know where to start." He cleared his throat. "Bobby's a computer hacker. The kid's really smart, and he wrote a virus that infected computers worldwide. Every night, he uses his private army of zombie-machines to spew out millions of e-mail ads for porno sites and online casinos. He gets a referral fee for every sucker they hook. Over the years, it's added up to hundreds of thousands of dollars."

So that was where he got his money. I thought of the tech magazines I'd seen in his bedroom, then the glow of that television from the other room in the barn. Only it hadn't been a television. It must have been a computer monitor—or many computer monitors.

"And Dawson?" I asked. "Did the kid buy him off too?"

"Yeah. Paid him a hundred thousand dollars in cash to lay off. It seems Dawson was already being looked at for corruption. Want to know something funny? Dawson wanted to kill Mitch from the beginning, but Bobby refused. The kid only gave in when Mitch sold Bailey's Final Call to me."

"Bobby loved that horse." I had seen it in his eyes.

"Apparently the kid thought the deal would fall apart after Mitch died. Never mind that the contracts had all been signed."

"Then he wasn't trying to kill Bailey?"

"Hell no. He accidentally gave the horse too much tranquilizer. The overdose turned up in the second blood test—Dr. Rothman called me yesterday afternoon and let me know. The plan was to knock Bailey out, then lure Mitch and the other farmhand, Carl, over to see him. Carl would have been Bobby's alibi. But since we were there, Bobby used us instead."

I nodded. "And while the farm was crawling with police, Daws walked out of the barn and joined the investigation."

"Exactly, just like you said."

Only I had been joking, and it hadn't been Nunes who shot Mitch.

"Why did Daws shoot Bobby?"

"Dawson was in the back of the room. He picked up on what you were doing and thought Bobby might confess to save his mother."

"But why did he shout a warning to me? There wasn't a knife!"

"If Bobby had a knife, or Dawson thought Bobby had a knife, that would make it a justified shooting. Defending the innocent—don't smirk, that's you—and all that."

"Only Dawson didn't kill him."

"Yeah. His aim was slightly off."

It made sense, in a twisted sort of way.

I asked, "So what now?"

"Well, since you're going to be laid up for a while, I thought you could stay with Cree and me till you're recovered. We have that guest house by the pool . . ."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." He grinned. "But I can promise you a young and attentive full-time nurse, three healthy meals a day, and all the Diet Dr Pepper you can drink!"

"Feh," I said. It was going to be a long, long summer. 🐦

Solution to the June "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. John Wayne

B. Kidding

C. Addition

D. Laughs

E. Bathing

F. Castoff

G. Allegation

H. Lampoon

I. Lazy Susan

J. Impalas

K. Thomas

L. Molasses

M. Upper House

N. Reflection

O. Detests

P. Emphasis

Q. Rhinestone

R. Monochrome

S. Yellowwood

T. Sarasota

U. Wasted

V. Eye candy

W. Establish

X. Timpani

QUOTATION

Author—J(onathan) KALB

Work—CALL IT MURDER, MY SWEET (*New York Times*, August 9, 2007.)

"Among the many pleasures of classic noir films . . . is their chiseled dialogue. Goons, floozies and stoolies talk in aphorisms . . . A hard-boiled dame . . . won't just say, 'Go away,' when she can say, 'That's between me and the lamppost and you ain't no lamppost.'"

THE STORY THAT WON

Luciana Frigerio/Graphistock



The January/February Photograph contest was won by Brian Spencer of Aptos, California. Honorable mentions go to Norma Weston of Abilene, Texas; A. M. Gavin of Los Angeles, California; Tony Lewis of Redwater, Texas; Paulette Reed of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Mirari of Las Cruces, New Mexico; Lisa R. Bremus of Paterson, New Jersey; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; James A. Stewart of Butler, Pennsylvania; and Reese Copeland of Yakima, Washington.

KEEN ANTICIPATION

BRIAN SPENCER

Oh, everything had been carefully planned.

His months of anticipation were soon to yield results.

He very deliberately wiped his hands on a small cloth. It wouldn't do to have anyone find any traces of butter on his hands. Oh no, that wouldn't do at all.

He sat at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at his handiwork. From this angle you couldn't even tell that there was anything on the stairs where they turned and continued going up. Perhaps they had a slight glow to them, but nothing more.

He was ready. He called up the stairs.

"Sweetheart, could you come down for a moment? I have a surprise for you."

At the top of the stairs, his patient wife sat waiting. The rifle across her knees was loaded and cocked. Her gloved finger rested lightly on the trigger.

Her months of anticipation were soon to yield results.

She was ready. She called down the stairs.

"Oh, Honey, I can't come down right now. Could you come up? I have something to show you."

She waited.

He waited.

THE LINEUP

JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT is the publisher of Wildside Press, based in Rockland, Maryland. His last story for AHMM, "Pit on the Road to Hell," appeared in the July/August 2006 issue.

Screenwriter TERRY BLACK's previous story for AHMM, "The Gun," appeared in the September 2004 issue.

A physician in Dayton, Ohio, JOHN H. DIRCKX's most recent story in our pages, "Numskulduggery" (January/February 2008), also featured Police Detective Cyrus Auburn.

JOAN DRUETT's most recent Wiki Coffin novel, *Deadly Shoals*, was published last year by St. Martin's Minotaur. She also published a nonfiction book last year, *Island of the Lost: Shipwrecked at the Edge of the World* (Algonquin Books).



BRENDAN DUBOIS won the 2007 Barry Award for Best Mystery Short Story for "The Right Call" (EQMM, September/October 2006). His most recent novels are the thrillers *Final Winter* (Five Star) and *Twilight* (St. Martin's Minotaur).

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, and other publications. He is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

MARTIN LIMÓN's novel *The Wandering Ghost*, the fifth in his series featuring George Sueño and Ernie Bascom, was published by Soho Crime in 2007. The fourth, *The Door to Bitterness*, is now in paperback.

ELAINE MENGE's last story for AHMM was "Best of Breed" in the January/February 2008 issue. A native of New Orleans, Ms. Menge now lives in Texas.

AMY MYERS's novel *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* was published last fall by Five Star. Her short stories have been collected in *Murder, 'Orrible Murder*, published by Crippen & Landru in 2006. This is her first appearance in AHMM.



JAS. R. PETRIN's AHMM story "Car Trouble" (November 2007) will be included in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2008*, to be published this fall by Houghton Mifflin. His most recent story for AHMM was "Gang of Three" in the May 2008 issue.

BEN REHDER's first Blanco County, Texas novel, *Buck Fever* (St. Martin's Minotaur), was a finalist for the Edgar Award for Best First Novel. His most recent, *Holy Moly*, has just been published by St. Martin's.

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles-based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

"Pandora's Dream" is the sixth story in GILBERT STACK's series featuring the itinerant bare-knuckle boxer Corey Callaghan, his trainer Patrick O'Sullivan, and the lady gambler Pandora Parson. The most recent was "Pandora's Ghost Town" in the January/February 2008 issue.

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG is best known to AHMM readers for her stories set in ancient Greece and featuring the Sophist Kleides. "A Private Battle" is set in the Wilkes-Barre area of Pennsylvania where she grew up.

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

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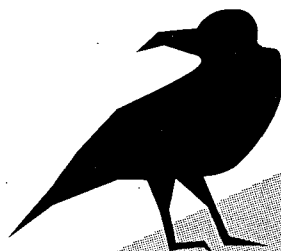
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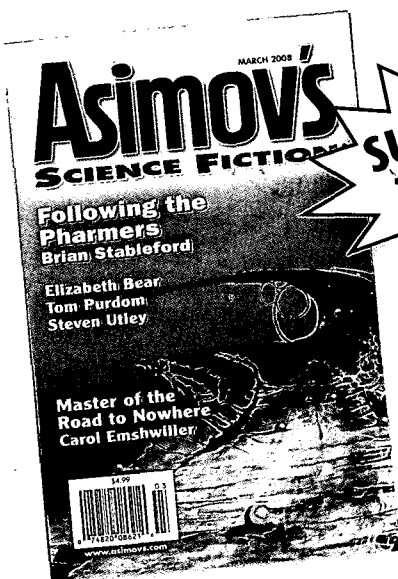
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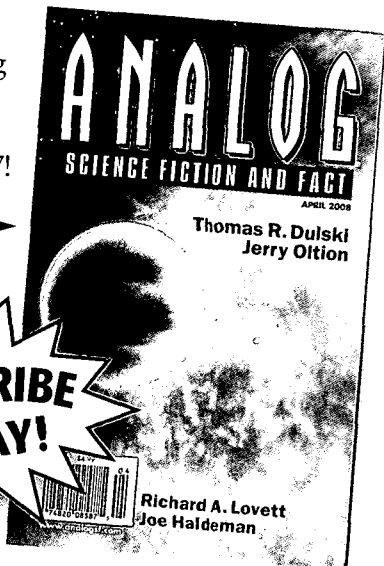
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